

THE USE OF THE VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE CORPS OF CADETS  
AS A MILITARY UNIT BEFORE AND DURING  
THE WAR BETWEEN THE STATES

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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE  
Military History

by

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

## ABSTRACT

THE USE OF THE VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE CORPS OF CADETS AS A MILITARY UNIT BEFORE AND DURING THE WAR BETWEEN THE STATES, by LCDR Michael M. Wallace, USN, 150 pages.

During the Civil War, the Confederate government passed legislation creating a national military academy and establishing the rank of Cadet. The national military college was unnecessary because the Confederacy already possessed numerous state military colleges. However, the Confederate government failed to properly engage these individual state schools by providing curriculum recommendations or commissioning their graduates. This shortsighted and domineering attitude by the Confederate government ensured that the military colleges failed in their mission to produce a large number of officers for the Confederate army.

It was the state governments (especially Virginia and South Carolina), not the Confederacy, that realized the importance that military colleges in the Confederacy and kept them operating with very little Confederate support. Virginia made a conscious decision to keep VMI open, not as a short term “officer candidate school,” but with her four-year military and academic curriculum intact. Supporting the school both militarily and financially, VMI produced the most officers of the southern military colleges for service in the Confederate army. Additionally, the cadets themselves were used as a military unit by the Confederate and state governments numerous times in the war.

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This work is dedicated to

Major Paul R. Syverson III, United States Army

and

Major Lowell T. Miller II, Army National Guard

Brother Rats

Died on the Field of Honor

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE MILITARY SCHOOL TRADITION AND THE FOUNDING OF THE VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE

The founding of the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point by Congress on 16 March 1802 established the military school tradition in the United States. The idea for a national military academy had been advocated since the Revolutionary War. Colonel Henry Knox, in a report to Congress about the reorganization of the Continental Army after defeats in New York in 1776, stated, “Officers can never act with confidence until they are masters of their profession, an academy established on a liberal plain would be of the utmost service to the continent.”<sup>1</sup> After the American Revolution, many former Continental Army officers, most notably General George Washington, pressed for an establishment of a permanent military academy. Certain politicians, such as Thomas Jefferson, fearing a standing army and an elite aristocratic officer corps, did not support a national academy.

Instead, until 1802 prospective Army officer candidates or cadets were assigned to individual branch units to receive training for their jobs. This system was not effective due to the lack of standardization between branches on what and how subjects were taught. In 1796, the Artillery and Engineering branches of the Army established a school at West Point to teach technical and scientific fundamentals common to both branches. While Congress did not specifically authorize the school, its reputation spread. Additionally, recent conflicts with France and the Barbary Pirates led Congress to establish a national military academy.<sup>2</sup>

West Point was fundamentally different from other colleges in the United States at the time. Colleges emphasized arts and letters with little or no instruction in mathematics or science. Military training, specifically artillery and military engineering, required scientific and technical training not available at other colleges in the country.<sup>3</sup> Using the French military and engineering academies, the *Ecole Militaire* and the *Ecole Polytechnique*, as a guide, West Point emphasized science and technical classes. Latin and Greek were not taught at West Point and knowledge of them was not required for admission. Additionally, West Point lacked religious affiliation and instruction, making it one of the first secular schools in the nation.

However, military skills that today are considered essential to a military officer received very little instruction. Drilling and basic soldiering skills were taught to cadets at the beginning of their first year but courses in tactics and strategy were only offered to the cadets in their senior year. When a cadet graduated, he would be a competent military engineer who would be able to command a company of men. As historian Bruce Allardice wrote, “the antebellum U. S. Army did much fort building but very little fighting, the West Point curriculum reflected the needs of the U. S. Army.”<sup>4</sup>

Other men and institutions added to the military school tradition in the United States. The most influential of these men was Captain Alden Partridge. Partridge was a graduate of West Point in 1806 and commissioned as an officer in the Corps of Engineers, and assigned to West Point as an instructor. Partridge was first an assistant professor and later professor of mathematics and engineering. After the War of 1812, Partridge was made acting superintendent. However, due to his lax administration of

West Point, Partridge was replaced as superintendent by Major Sylvanus Thayer and Partridge resigned from the Army in April 1818.<sup>5</sup>

Partridge spent the rest of his life attacking West Point and its system. He maintained that a large standing army was a menace to the United States and that the country would be better served by a college training citizens in the art of war.<sup>6</sup> The graduates of such an institution would then take jobs within society ready in times of need to take up arms and become leaders in the militia. Partridge's vision became a reality in 1819, when he founded the American Literary, Scientific and Military Academy at Norwich, Vermont (later renamed Norwich University). While based on the West Point military and educational system, the new school included courses in agriculture and modern languages making it much more diverse than the curriculum at West Point.

Partridge also traveled throughout the upper East Coast lecturing on the value of the citizen-soldier and his vision for military schools. His ideas advocating military colleges and the citizen-soldier concept spread throughout the United States in the 1820s and 1830s and led to a number of private military schools being founded in Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Hampshire and Virginia from 1830 to 1850.<sup>7</sup> Partridge toured Virginia in the early 1830's and left an impression of the benefits of military education on many state leaders.<sup>8</sup> Partridge is regarded as the founder of the system of military academies of elementary and secondary grade.<sup>9</sup>

The Commonwealth of Virginia needed some new ideas for its military training. By the 1830s, the militia system in place to defend Virginia had become more of a social than a military organization. Officers were chosen or elected from the militia ranks, not by their ability but by popularity, and could be quickly replaced if they did something to

offend the men in the militia. Virginia did not have an institution to teach military skills to militia officers. Partridge's idea of a military college in the state would enable the militia to become more professional.

The town of Lexington, Virginia, provided a location and a reason to establish a military school. Located at the upper end of the Shenandoah Valley, Lexington in the 1830s was a small village of a thousand inhabitants, the county seat and home to Washington College (now Washington and Lee University). Lexington was also the home to one of three arsenals established in 1816 by the state to store the large amount of weapons produced during the War of 1812.<sup>10</sup> The arsenal was guarded and defended by an independent Virginia company of twenty-eight men under a captain who received the same pay and allowances as troops in the United States Army.<sup>11</sup> While the discipline was strict, "a part was always off duty, and it was their custom to roam over the country foraging . . . many of these soldiers were fond of dram, and would sometimes go to some distillery and get a jug or gallon of good whiskey and get gloriously drunk."<sup>12</sup> Members also fought amongst themselves and in 1826, one guard killed another.<sup>13</sup> Doing away with the arsenal was out of the question because it provided much needed income to the small town. It was obvious that the guards of the arsenal had to be replaced but the question remained who would replace them.

While there is no definite proof of the originator of the idea of turning the arsenal into a military school, the idea was discussed at the state level in the 1820's to turn the arsenal into an educational institution with the students as the caretakers of the arms.<sup>14</sup> In December 1834, the Franklin Society, a debating body composed of influential citizens in Lexington, posed the question, "Would it be politic for the State to establish a military

school, at the arsenal, near Lexington, in connection with Washington College, on the plan of the West Point Academy?”<sup>15</sup> The question was contemplated and action on the question was voted down once before a unanimous vote in favor of the idea passed at the end of the month.

In August 1835, three articles appeared in the *Lexington Gazette* under the name “Civis” arguing for converting the arsenal into a military college. “Civis” was John T. L. Preston, a lawyer in Lexington. Preston stated that the question was whether or not the Lexington Arsenal could be organized to preserve its use as an arsenal and at the same time serve as a Literary Institution for the education of youths. Preston believed that it could and laid out a plan in which young men, sixteen to twenty-one years of age, would replace the present guard. Instead of receiving pay for guarding the arsenal, they would have the opportunity for a liberal education. The students would be under military discipline to secure the post but also to promote “industry, regularity and health.”<sup>16</sup> The young men would be appointed from each of the state’s senatorial districts. Pay students would be allowed as space allowed.

This plan, according to Preston, would greatly benefit Lexington. Instead of a group of guards, “respected by none, considered obnoxious by some and disliked by all,”<sup>17</sup> the town would instead have a corps of young men, “guided by virtuous principal, ennobled by the ardor of patriotism.”<sup>18</sup> The new guards of the arsenal would not have time to create disruption in town because their time would be spent in academic pursuits.

Finally, Preston argued that the graduates of this military school would provide Virginia with a growing pool of men from all regions in the state who could instruct and serve as officers in the state militia. He wrote:

Who would not wish to see those really handsome buildings which, upon their commanding site, adorn the approach to our village, no longer the receptacle of drones obliged to be restrained by coercion of military rule, a discordant element in our social system – but the helpful and pleasant abode of a crowd of honorable youths, pressing up the hill of science with noble emulation, a gratifying spectacle, an honor to our country and our state, objects of honest pride to their instructors and fair specimens of citizens-soldiers, attached to their native State, proud of her fame and ready in every time of deepest peril to vindicate her honor or defend her rights?<sup>19</sup>

The idea to turn the arsenal into a military school had opposition. Arguments appeared soon after the “Civis” articles in the Lexington Gazette to counter the idea of a military school by fireproofing the arsenal with two night watchmen providing security or creating a deaf and dumb asylum. A newspaper in nearby Buchanan, Virginia questioned whether citizens could rest secure knowing that boys would be guarding the arsenal, “especially a Virginia boy . . . proverbially indiscreet as our youths are?”<sup>20</sup>

Preston’s articles combined with strong legislative backing from the southwest part of Virginia helped the idea of a military school gain statewide support. On 22 March 1836, the Virginia Legislature passed an act to re-organize the arsenal into a military school. However, problems with the legislation kept the school from opening.<sup>21</sup> The Legislature amended the original act in 1837 and repealed it outright in 1838.<sup>22</sup> Finally in March 1839, the Legislature approved a law that solved the previous problems. The arsenal and its appropriation would be transferred to the new military school and the professors and military students were to be held responsible for the safekeeping, protection and preservation of the grounds, buildings, arms and other property of the State located at Lexington. When asked to name the new school, Preston recommended the Virginia Military Institute. As he later recalled the name, “seemed appropriately significant: Virginia – as a State institution, neither sectional nor denominational.

Military – indicating its characteristic feature. Institute – as something different from either college or university.”<sup>23</sup>

A Board of Visitors was established in 1837 to organize the school under the original legislative act. The Board was composed of five members appointed by the governor. Among the members appointed, Claudius Crozet was selected as the president of the Board. Crozet was a fortunate choice for the presidency of the board. A Frenchman by birth, he had been educated at the *Ecole Polytechnique*, the French Military Engineering College. After graduation, Crozet was an officer in Napoleon’s army and was unfortunate enough to be on the retreat from Moscow. After immigrating to the United States he had served as a professor of engineering and mathematics at West Point and was a member of the faculty when Partridge was superintendent. After leaving West Point, Crozet was appointed as the Chief Engineer of Virginia and was well known throughout the Commonwealth for his science and skill.<sup>24</sup>

The new legislation in 1839 expanded the Board of Visitors to ten members, still appointed by the Governor, each serving a one-year term. The Adjutant General of Virginia was made a de facto member and the other new Board members were from Washington College and the town of Lexington. J.T.L. Preston was one of the members appointed from the town. The expanded Board met in Lexington in May 1839 to start the process of organizing the school. With Crozet’s experience at the *Ecole Polytechnique* and as an instructor at West Point, the structure of the new Virginia Military Institute would draw heavily on both. Regulations, uniforms and curriculum were borrowed or incorporated from West Point.

However, the new Virginia Military Institute (VMI) was not West Point. Preston outlined the differences between the two schools. He wrote that West Point had an unlimited means to operate from the federal government, a single mission to produce army officers and graduates had a guaranteed job upon commencement. Because of these reasons the education obtained at West Point was in high demand and hence discipline could be enforced with a severity impossible under other conditions.<sup>25</sup>

VMI on the other hand would begin with a very meager endowment and its graduates would not enter a single profession, but the varied work of civil life. To many young men this would not be as attractive or as secure as a military career. Discipline could not be enforced with the same rigor as at West Point. The military portion of the school, still essential for discipline, would not be the primary focus in the education. It was expedient to take West Point as a model but also to provide for necessary variations.<sup>26</sup>

The military system, while not the central cornerstone, did play an important role in the foundation of the new school. Besides the benefits of drill in producing future militia officers, many politicians and educators saw other advantages in a military school system. Colleges in the antebellum South were plagued with disciplinary problems. A Nashville newspaper addressed student violence stating, "In the planting States where the great laboring force is black, and the climate unfriendly to field labor by white men, it is extremely difficult for parents to exercise the controlling restraints over youth, which their indiscreet tendencies and want of knowledge require . . . (Military education) teaches obedience subordination and deference to authority, which constitutes a sound basis for good citizenship, and elevated morals."<sup>27</sup> In 1840 a student killed his professor



after a disagreement at the University of Virginia. The University of Alabama had numerous student fights, riots and duels in the decades before the Civil War including a riot in 1848 that led to the suspension of all but three students. The student rowdiness combined with increased sectional tensions caused the University of Alabama to convert to a military college in 1860.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, military drill was believed to produce a healthy body and the mental and moral qualities needed to be a gentleman.

Besides establishing the military portion of the school, the Board of Visitors had another task, to find a Principal Professor who would run day-to-day operations. The Board eventually settled on a Professor of Mathematics at Hampden-Sydney College, Francis H. Smith. Smith had been born in Norfolk, Virginia on 18 October 1812 and was an 1833 graduate of West Point. He had served in the Artillery Branch and as a mathematics instructor at West Point before leaving the Army in 1836 to accept the Professorship of Mathematics at Hampden-Sydney.<sup>29</sup> Preston wrote a letter to Smith on 29 April 1839, outlining the plans for the new school and asking if he could present Smith's name to the Board for the job of Principal Professor at the next meeting. The letter caught Smith totally by surprise. Smith was unaware that an act had been passed establishing a new school in Lexington or that the town even had an arsenal.<sup>30</sup> Smith was non-committal about the offer and wrote back to Preston asking for additional information. Smith was concerned about the small number of cadets (set at forty) to be enrolled at the new school. This number was set to avoid a rivalry with Washington College and Smith felt that he could not undertake a work so limited in its scope and restricted in its field of operation.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, the Board elected Smith as VMI Principal Professor on 30 May 1839 with the rank of major in the state militia.<sup>32</sup> The

position of Principal Professor was later changed to Superintendent with the rank of colonel by the Legislature in July 1842. An editorial in the Valley Star on 20 June 1839, summed up Smith's nomination by saying, "This appointment we hail as an omen of happy auspices on the birth of our new institution . . . from all that we have heard of him, we feel assured that he merits in a rare degree the peculiar qualifications requisite in the head of such an institute as that over which he is called to preside . . . (he) is a member of the Episcopal Church and, lastly, is a VIRGINIAN."<sup>33</sup>

On 11 July 1839, an executive order from the Governor was placed in newspapers statewide notifying citizens that the Virginia Military Institute would begin operation on 11 November and that the Board of Visitors would receive and consider applications for admission in September. The legislation establishing VMI provided for two types of cadets to attend the school, state (or regular) cadets and pay (irregular) cadets. The state cadet program was intended for indigent youths to receive a higher education. Each of the thirty-two district state senators would be able to appoint one cadet. State cadets would have most of their fees paid by the state and then serve the state for a period of two years after graduation. Pay cadets would be accepted on a space available basis and would pay full fees (\$225 per year).<sup>34</sup> The Board believed that there would be between thirty-forty cadets admitted for the first class. At the end of September, twenty state cadets and thirteen paying cadets were appointed to the matriculating class.

The state cadet program was further modified in 1842 by legislation based on the recommendations of the State Adjutant General Richardson and by (then) Major Preston. The new legislation required that state cadets reimburse the state by teaching in Virginian schools for a period of two years. This legislation proved to be of great consequence for

the state and soon VMI was producing a large number of graduates serving as teachers throughout Virginia and the South.

The new Principal Professor, Major Smith, traveled to Lexington to meet Preston for the first time in October 1839. Smith presented his thoughts on the Institute. He believed that the Board was thinking too small about the future of the Institute. Smith argued that a school which provided military discipline and education in the sciences would be highly desirable in Virginia, a state with a strong military spirit, and would be supported by patronage from those able to pay. More pay cadets would enable the school to grow and broaden allowing the curriculum to offer a well-rounded course of study while embracing the sciences.<sup>35</sup> Smith's ideas were accepted by the Board and in two years, pay cadets overtook the number of state cadets admitted to the school.

In establishing the curriculum of the new school, West Point was again used as the model. Crozet wrote to Smith:

These books were selected by the Board in order to prevent all delay at the beginning; the regulations of West Point guided in the choice. But on a recent visit I personally made to the Academy, I learned that Berard's Grammar had never been published.<sup>36</sup>

Smith himself conferred with Colonel Thayer, the former Superintendent of West Point for suggestions on academics and for uniforms, arms and equipment.<sup>37</sup> As a result, the course of education mirrored that taught at West Point and included mathematics, mechanics, chemistry, engineering, tactics, French, German as well as English and German literature.<sup>38</sup>

On 11 November 1839, seventeen regular cadets and six irregular cadets were admitted to the new school. Major Smith met the full Board of Visitors for the first time and the Board appointed Preston as the schools' other instructor. Cadet John B. Strange

relieved the last arsenal enlisted man and became the first cadet sentinel guarding the arsenal. The Virginia Military Institute, the first state military college in the United States, was in operation.

VMI was the second public college in Virginia and among the first colleges in the south to offer engineering and math courses.<sup>39</sup> The popularity of VMI and the military school concept soon spread throughout the south. In a letter to the Governor of Virginia shortly after VMI opened, Crozet wrote, “There is, on the contrary, a very favorable feeling toward this infant institution prevailing, not only among the public of Virginia, but even in other states, from which applications have actually been made . . . and from every indication it may be expected that when the Institute is in full operation, the want of accommodations alone will limit the number of cadets.”<sup>40</sup>

The state of South Carolina established in 1842 its own military colleges, the Citadel and Arsenal, following the Virginia Military Institute pattern.<sup>41</sup> With the clouds of war growing in the 1850’s, a number of military colleges, both public and private were founded throughout the south, also based on the Virginia Military Institute model. Smith was consulted for advice on aspects of the new schools and effectively ran a teacher-placement service for VMI graduates. Major William T. Sherman founded the Louisiana Military Academy (now Louisiana State University) in 1859 and wrote to Smith for advice on courses of instruction, uniforms, regulations and a suitable location for the school.<sup>42</sup> Kentucky chartered a private military school in 1847 and in Georgia a private military college was founded in 1851 and taken over by the state in 1857. From 1858 to 1860, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, North Carolina and Alabama all either established military colleges or subsidized existing private military colleges.<sup>43</sup> In Bruce

Allardice's groundbreaking study on Southern military schools, he states that between 1827 and 1860, there were ninety-six military colleges, military academies and universities with cadet programs in the slave states. During the same time period, only fifteen military schools have been identified in free states and many of these failed before the Civil War, the major exception being Norwich University.<sup>44</sup> The preponderance of military colleges in the South before the Civil War would give the Confederate Army a trained pool of men to serve as officers at the company and field grade level at the beginning of the war, something that the Union Army did not have.

Why did the South have so many military schools and colleges? In his 1956 book, *The Militant South*, John Hope Franklin argued that military schools in the South enjoyed the support and popularity because of the Southern martial spirit, especially in the decade before the Civil War.<sup>45</sup> While a large number of military schools were established in the 1850's, both the Virginia Military Institute and the Citadel and Arsenal were established twenty years before the start of the war. These military schools were not established just to train militia officers but to produce engineers and teachers for state service. Northern states had an advanced educational system and did not need a military college system to produce engineers and teachers.

The Virginia Military Institute initially was created to provide a replacement for the state military arsenal guard. Due to the foresight of certain individuals, the school became the primary college in the state for graduating engineers, teachers and officers for the state militia. Using West Point as a model, VMI itself became a model for later Southern military schools, and became a tremendous force throughout the south.

Technical courses of study made VMI different from all other colleges in Virginia but it was the military system that made it invaluable to the Confederacy during the Civil War.

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<sup>1</sup>George S. Pappas, *To the Point: The United States Military Academy, 1802-1902* (Westport: Praeger, 1993), 5.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>4</sup>Bruce Allardice, "West Points of the Confederacy: Southern Military Schools and the Confederate Army," *Civil War History*, December 1997, 313.

<sup>5</sup>The Dean of the United States Military Academy, "Alden Partridge," [article on-line]; available from [www.dean.usma.edu/departments/math/about/history/partridg.htm](http://www.dean.usma.edu/departments/math/about/history/partridg.htm); Internet. Accessed on 10 October 2005. Partridge was tried by court martial and found guilty of disobedience of orders and of assuming command without authority. He was cleared of the additional charge of mutiny but the court sentenced him to be cashiered. President Monroe permitted Partridge to resign. For further information about the trial see the article by R. Ernest Dupuy, "Mutiny at West Point," *American Heritage Magazine*, December 1955.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>The Virginia Literary, Scientific and Military Academy was founded in Portsmouth, Virginia in 1839 and lasted until 1846.

<sup>8</sup>Colonel Keith Gibson, Head, VMI Museum, interviewed by Michael Wallace, 8 October 2005.

<sup>9</sup>The Dean of the United States Military Academy, "Alden Partridge," [article on-line]; available from [www.dean.usma.edu/departments/math/about/history/partridg.htm](http://www.dean.usma.edu/departments/math/about/history/partridg.htm); Internet. Accessed on 10 October 2005.

<sup>10</sup>The other arsenals were located in what is now West Virginia and in Richmond.

<sup>11</sup>Richard M. McMurry, *Virginia Military Institute Alumni in the Civil War* (Howard: Lynchburg, 1999), 2.

<sup>12</sup>Francis H. Smith III, "Old Spex of the VMI" (Unpublished manuscript, 1941), 29.

<sup>13</sup>McMurry, 2.

<sup>14</sup>There are many theories to who first proposed the idea for a military school at the site of the arsenal in Lexington. General Nichols, the third superintendent of VMI wrote that Andrew Alexander, a prominent and influential citizen of Rockbridge County was frequently mentioned as the originator of the idea of a military school at the arsenal. Another story is that Hugh Barclay, a merchant of Lexington, visited West Point in the early 1830s and was very impressed with the school. He was a strong supporter of the school in Lexington and was appointed a member of the original Board of Visitors by Governor Campbell in 1839. Colonel J.T.L Preston denied that he had the original idea for VMI but instead provided the name to the school.

<sup>15</sup>Francis H. Smith, *History of the Virginia Military Institute* (Evergreen: New York, 1912), 12.

<sup>16</sup>Francis H. Smith, III, 'Old Spex of the VMI', 32.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 32

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>19</sup>Francis H. Smith, 18. The majority of this statement is still required memorization for new cadets ("Rats") at VMI.

<sup>20</sup>William Couper, *One Hundred Years at VMI*, I, 24.

<sup>21</sup>McMurry, 4. One of the bills tied the military school as a part of Washington College. The College stated that they were a private institution and thus not a under the control of the state legislature. On another occasion, the arsenal buildings were judged to be too small and not enough money was appropriated to improve them.

<sup>22</sup>Couper, 30.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>27</sup>*Nashville Union and American*, Feb. 14, 1855. The paper was advocating that the Federal Government should establish a "Southern West Point" due to the fact that West Point was in a far too northern latitude and "unfriendly to southern constitutions." Jefferson Davis, then Secretary of War, was against the plan.

<sup>28</sup>Allardice, 314.

<sup>29</sup>Wise, 38.

<sup>30</sup>Smith, 33.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>32</sup>The Board received letters of recommendation for Smith from General Winfield Scott, Commanding General of the United States Army and Major Charles H. Smith, Paymaster of the Army.

<sup>33</sup>Smith, 3rd., 40.

<sup>34</sup>McMurry, 9.

<sup>35</sup>Smith, 3rd., 44.

<sup>36</sup>Couper, 51.

<sup>37</sup>Wise, 40.

<sup>38</sup>Couper, 33.

<sup>39</sup>The University of Virginia (1819) was the first public college in Virginia.

<sup>40</sup>Couper, 62.

<sup>41</sup>South Carolina also had a problem with the state guards at its arsenals. There were two military colleges established in South Carolina, the Arsenal for freshmen and the Citadel for upperclassmen. They were combined into the South Carolina Military Academy in 1860.

<sup>42</sup>Edwin L. Dooley, Jr., "Smith and VMI on the Eve of the Civil War," in *A Crowd of Honorable Youth*, ed. Thomas W. Davis et al. (Lexington: VMI, 1989), 17-18.

<sup>43</sup>Allardice, 316. The University of Alabama, the University of Nashville and the University of the South, Sewanee all served as military colleges before the Civil War.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>45</sup>John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South* (Harvard: Cambridge, 1956), 167.



## CHAPTER 2

### MILITARY TRAINING AT THE VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE AND THE PREWAR TRIPS OF THE CORPS OF CADETS

The military system began for the matriculating cadets during summer encampments before the start of the regular school year. These summer encampments were the first and most important military training that new cadets received. These encampments were necessary because VMI regulations made no provision for a summer furlough for rising sophomores and the arsenal had to be continuously guarded by the cadets, even during the summer months.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the regulations decreed that there would be an encampment with the instruction being exclusively military after graduation exercises on 4 July until 1 September. Summer encampment consisted of tents on the parade ground next to barracks where new cadets received instruction in military drill as well as academic subjects to prepare them for placement examinations in late August.<sup>2</sup>

The superintendent, Colonel Francis Smith, stated that the purpose of the summer encampments was to prepare the new cadets for the soldierly and academic life they would embark on in the fall.<sup>3</sup> A new cadet wrote to his parents about the summer encampment:

We have to get up every morning at 5 o'clock, go to squad drill at 5 1/2, drill for an hour, come back, go to breakfast at seven, & then we go to squad drill again at nine, drill until ten, come back & study until twelve, & then go to recitation, go to dinner at 1 o'clock, study until four, go to recitation, & then go to squad drill again at five, drill until six, come back & go to dress parade half past six, go to supper at 7 o'clock & then we go to bed at ten. You can see we have not got much time to spare—I tell you it keeps me busy as a bee.<sup>4</sup>

Third Classmen (sophomores) were employed as instructors to teach the new cadets military basics such as the manual of arms and small unit drill. This system had

benefits for both the new and old cadets; it allowed the new cadets to get their first taste of military life and allowed the senior cadets the valuable experience of training men in military skills. In addition to the summer encampments, the Corps also undertook long marches throughout the upper Shenandoah Valley. During the summer of 1843, a large part of the Corps marched to White Sulphur Springs (now in West Virginia, a distance of sixty miles) and remained there a week before returning to VMI.<sup>5</sup>

On 1 September every year, cadets broke summer encampment and entered barracks to start the regular school year. During the academic year, military duty continued as “cadets daily practiced in military exercises, at such hours as (should) not interfere with their regular studies.”<sup>6</sup> Military drill was held daily at 4 p.m. Monday through Thursday, with Friday reserved for a full dress parade and a full dress inspection on Saturday.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to academics and military duties, cadets were also expected to perform guard duty. VMI was still the location for one of the state arsenals and providing a guard was the primary reason for the creation of VMI.<sup>8</sup> Guard duty, as it is today, was a tiring and tedious detail that had to be performed and was far from being a favorite among cadets. Cadets constantly complained about guard duty but VMI’s administration was unmoved. The schools regulations stated: “There being, perhaps, no better test of soldiership and the discipline of command than the manner in which the duties of the sentinels are performed, Cadets should understand the honor and responsibility of a soldier on post.”<sup>9</sup>

Academics and military studies did overlap during the academic year. Military topics were taught to the First (senior) and Second (junior) classes. The curriculum in

1860 included infantry tactics for Second Classmen and infantry tactics, artillery tactics and military history and strategy for First Classmen.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that while formal academic military training did not begin until the junior year, freshmen and sophomore cadets did receive basic military training and knew how to instruct men in military drill.

In 1859, VMI created a Chair of Military Strategy, the first of its kind in the United States. The position reflected the growing state of unrest and insecurity throughout the state of Virginia.<sup>11</sup> Smith commented on the need for such a course:

The changes which have taken place in the art of war, and in the branches of military tactics, which the recent contests in the Crimea have developed, call for a very different grade of instruction for our military officers than that existing 20 or 30 years ago. For any and every emergency to which the state may be called, the graduates and cadets of this Institution are supplied with a thorough, scientific and practical course of military instruction, which places this commonwealth, in the respect, and at this time, in a better condition of military defense than can possibly exist in any state in the Union.<sup>12</sup>

The person responsible for military training at VMI was the Commandant of Cadets. For the first few years after VMI was founded in 1839, the faculty was made up of two professors, Smith and Major J. T. L. Preston. Smith performed both as superintendent and as commandant. He was soon overwhelmed in running the school and passed the responsibility of commandant to Captain Williamson, the professor of engineering and drawing and the third instructor at the Institute. Williamson proved to be a poor disciplinarian and a search commenced in 1846 to find a new Physical Sciences instructor who would perform the duties of commandant.

Advertisements were placed in Virginia newspapers and inquiries were made through Army channels.<sup>13</sup> One of the officers recommended to Smith from the Army was a Virginian and West Point graduate, Lieutenant George H. Thomas.<sup>14</sup> Smith sent

correspondence to Thomas about the position but Thomas was preparing for the upcoming offensive in Mexico and declined the offer. Thomas did, however, recommend Lieutenant William Gilham for the position. Gilham was a classmate of Thomas' and had served as an assistant to the Natural Philosophy Department at West Point.<sup>15</sup> Gilham sent in his application with endorsements, one of those being Gilham's former company commander Braxton Bragg.<sup>16</sup> As a first lieutenant, Gilham had fought under General Zachary Taylor at the beginning of the Mexican War and had been distinguished for gallantry at the Battles of Palo Alto and Resaca.<sup>17</sup>

Gilham accepted the appointment from the VMI Board of Visitors and became the Commandant of Cadets, Instructor of Tactics and Professor of Natural and Experimental Philosophy and Chemistry with the rank of major in 1846.<sup>18</sup> The selection of Major Gilham was fortuitous for VMI. Besides being a capable professor of philosophy and agriculture, Gilham was an outstanding commandant and instructor of tactics. Within a year of arriving at VMI, Smith said that Gilham was "quick, accurate and self-possessed, he had a magnetic power of command which made the drill of the corps the equal, if not the superior of that at West Point. In the command of the Battalion of Cadets, Major Gilham has no superior."<sup>19</sup> Gilham was also popular with the cadets. Cadet Munford wrote that Gilham "was the brightest professor we had in his day – scientifically – and was a superb drill master, the best I ever saw."<sup>20</sup> James T. Murfee, Class of 1853, wrote in later years,

I thought then, as the cadets thought, that Gilham exerted more influence upon the characters of the young men than any other officer or professor there. "Old Gill," as we all called him, was our beau-ideal of an educator, gentleman and drillmaster; he commanded our profound respect, admiration and love. To us he was almost the whole institution.<sup>21</sup>

The contributions that Gilham made to the educational and military aspect of VMI have largely been overlooked due to the Civil War exploits of another VMI instructor, Thomas J. Jackson. However, without Major Gilham, VMI and her Corps of Cadets would not have had the high reputation they did in the state of Virginia prior to the Civil War.<sup>22</sup>

In 1848, VMI Board of Visitors decided to hire an additional professor and divide Gilham's department with a Professor of Natural and Experimental Philosophy and a Professor of Chemistry, Mineralogy, and Geology. Gilham would continue to instruct infantry tactics with the new professor instructing artillery tactics. While a VMI graduate was considered, Smith and the Board of Visitors wanted a West Point graduate and more importantly, a southerner for the position.<sup>23</sup> Major Daniel H. Hill, a Professor of Mathematics at Washington College and West Point graduate, suggested the name of Brevet Major Thomas J. Jackson during a social call with Smith. Hill and Jackson had served together in Mexico, both narrowly escaping deaths when a Mexican shell crashed through the shelter in which they were sleeping.<sup>24</sup> Offering Jackson the teaching position immediately appealed to Smith for two reasons; Jackson was a highly regarded war hero and was from the western part of Virginia where public and private support for VMI had always been weak.

Jackson was born in Harrison County, Virginia (now West Virginia), graduated from West Point in July, 1846 and commissioned a brevet second lieutenant of artillery. Soon involved in the war with Mexico, Jackson, in less than fifteen months, was brevetted first to captain then to major for "gallant and meritorious conduct" in the battles of Contreras, Churubusco and Chapultepec. After the end of the war, Jackson was less

enthralled with the peacetime Army. When Smith's letter arrived to him about the position at VMI, Jackson immediately wrote back, "Though strong ties bind me to the Army, yet I cannot consent to decline so flattering an offer. Please present my name to the Board, and accept my thanks for your kindness."<sup>25</sup> Unanimously elected by the Board of Visitors, Jackson tendered his resignation to the Army and reported to Lexington in early August 1852 to assume his teaching position.

It was soon apparent that Jackson was a failure as a professor.<sup>26</sup> Smith wrote about Jackson's teaching abilities after the war that, "He was no teacher, he had no qualification for the Chair of Experimental Philosophy, and he lacked tact in getting along with his classes. . . . He was a brave man, a conscientious man and a good man, but he was no Professor."<sup>27</sup> Tradition maintains that Jackson would memorize each lesson directly from the textbook and then regurgitate it to his class. If a cadet interrupted him with a question, Jackson would start his lesson from the beginning. Cadets, alumni and parents complained to Smith and the Board of Visitors about Jackson's lack of teaching skills throughout Jackson's tenure at VMI. In 1856, members of the VMI Society of Alumni presented a petition to the Board of Visitors to have Jackson removed from his teaching position due to mismanagement in his Department of Natural Philosophy. The Board of Visitors quickly tabled the petition without discussion. Jackson was unaware of the petition until a year later. To further diffuse the controversy, Smith wrote to one of the alumnus that "He [Jackson] has greatly improved since you graduated and he is improving daily."<sup>28</sup> Jackson's stiff, stern demeanor combined with his lack of grace and peculiar constant "illnesses" gave the cadets an easy target to ridicule. Cadets nicknamed Jackson, calling him "Tom Fool," "Old Jack" and "Old Blue Lights."<sup>29</sup> Cadets even

resorted to violence against Jackson. A brick was dropped from a barracks window by a cadet, missing Jackson by inches. Another cadet, court-martialed on charges brought by Jackson, was allowed to resign and then promptly challenged Jackson to a duel which Jackson declined.<sup>30</sup> Jackson brought charges against cadets more often than other professors and court-martialed six cadets during his time at VMI.<sup>31</sup>

Where Jackson quickly gained the respect of Smith, other faculty and the cadets was instructing artillery drill. Smith wrote shortly after Jackson's arrival that, "I have no doubt the Major will make a good effective drill. He has the reputation of being one of the best artillerist of his rank in the service, and the more I see of him the more pleased I am with the selection the Board has made."<sup>32</sup> A graduate of the Class of 1861, wrote in late 1863 that, "as soon as the sound of the guns would fall upon his ears, a change would come over Major Jackson. He would grow more erect; the grasp upon his saber would tighten; the quiet eyes would flash; the large nostrils would dilate, and the calm, grave face would flow with the proud spirit of a warrior."<sup>33</sup> It is no wonder that Smith defended Jackson teaching ability in the classroom so that Jackson could teach the subject he was a master of – artillery.

To train the cadets in artillery and rifle tactics, VMI obtained weapons from the Federal Government. In 1847, the Adjutant General of Virginia, William Richardson, wrote to the Secretary of War about obtaining artillery for VMI.

The six pounder bronze guns furnished by the US being found too heavy for the instruction of the corps of cadets in the "manual of piece," the fact was stated to the Ordnance Department with a request that four 3 or 4 pounder brass guns upon lighter carriages, without caissons, might be furnished as part of the annual quota of arms (for the State of Virginia). . . . They were required for drill only, not for target firing, the corps being supplied with larger guns for that purpose. . . . As regards the corps of cadets at the Va. Military Institute, they are as athletic as

those at West Point and well qualified to enter the army when they graduate. But the Institute is unprovided with horses either for artillery or cavalry as West Point is.<sup>34</sup>

The Cyrus Alger Foundry in Boston was directed to design a battery of four six-pounder bronze guns for VMI and delivered them in June 1848, each piece bearing the seal of the State of Virginia. These guns trained several hundred VMI cadets under the instruction of Jackson in the years preceding the war, producing many future Confederate artillery leaders. However, no horses were available to pull the guns and so Fourth (freshmen) and Third (sophomores) Classmen were employed as “horses” during instruction.<sup>35</sup> At the beginning of the Civil War, these guns were issued to the Rockbridge Artillery, nicknamed “Matthew, Mark, Luke and John” and served in the battles of Falling Water, First Manassas, Savage Station and Malvern Hill.<sup>36</sup>

VMI, as a state arsenal, had a large number of flintlock muskets for the cadets to drill with when the school was founded. New muskets were issued in April 1845 from Harper’s Ferry and were shorter than the muskets they replaced.<sup>37</sup> In 1850, after the Corps acted as an honor guard for President Zachary Taylor, the President directed that the VMI Corps receive new rifles from the U. S. Government. The rifles delivered to VMI in 1853 were new Model 1851 Springfield Cadet rifles. The Cadet rifles were scaled down versions of the standard Army Springfield musket, both lighter and shorter. Designed for use at West Point, the rifles were designed as a training arm and were in .57 caliber, smaller than the standard .69 caliber.<sup>38</sup> While designed as a training arm, the Corps used these muskets during the Civil War until replaced by Austrian rifle muskets in late 1863.



As the Corps became proficient in drill, trips throughout the state were arranged by state and school officials to show off the Corps of Cadets and to gain publicity for the VMI. In reality, most of these trips were planned to correspond to legislative sessions in Richmond where funding for the school was either being debated or voted on. These trips were ordered by the Adjutant General of the state, William Richardson.

Richardson had a long association with VMI. Born in 1795, Richardson had commanded a militia company in the War of 1812 and held numerous state positions in the 1820's and 1830's, among them Secretary of the Commonwealth and first librarian of the Virginia State Library.<sup>39</sup> Richardson was appointed the Adjutant General of Virginia in 1841 and served in this position, with the exception of one year, until 1876. Due to the Adjutant General being a permanent member of the VMI Board of Visitors, Richardson was a great supporter of VMI and served as VMI's agent in dealing with the state legislature. Richardson and Smith became close friends and their voluminous correspondence between each other was very open and warm. Smith wrote of Richardson:

When I consider the early history of the Institute, its rapid growth and development, and bring before me those who were the chief agents in this work, I know of no one whose pervading influence was so marked as Gen. Richardson's. He had been a soldier in the War of 1812, and though old timey in many of his ideals, there was always the ring of true metal about him. He was fearless and outspoken in the discharge of all of his duties and stood up for the discipline which he knew so essential for the perpetuity of the school. He was wise. He saw the dangers from the gathering clouds which were soon to burst upon the country in the dreadful Civil War of 1861-1865, and his mind was constantly occupied with devising ways whereby the Institute might do its full work for the State and Country. The voluminous correspondence with him during these long years abundantly testifies to all of this. . . . But I enjoyed though this long period the happiness of having in General Richardson as true and steadfast a friend as ever lived.<sup>40</sup>

Richardson was aware that military units were judged according to their proficiency on parade and in 1841 Richardson conceived the first Corps trip to Richmond to give legislators a better idea of the institution they had founded just two years before. There was some question as to whether the governor could or should order the corps to Richmond, but on 21 December 1851 orders arrived and arrangements were made for a wintry canal trip. The orders stated that the Corps was to “repair to the City of Richmond, at some time during the present session of the General Assembly . . . in order to hold the semi-annual examination of the cadets before the Houses of the General Assembly.”<sup>41</sup>

The Corps arrived on 8 January and was welcomed by the State Guard in front of the State Arsenal. It was discovered that no provisions had been made to house the cadets so hasty arrangements were made to billet the cadets in the private homes of citizens and legislators.<sup>42</sup> Public examinations were conducted by the legislators and the parade drew large crowds despite the fact that at this time the Corps only numbered 46 cadets. Soon after the cadets returned to VMI, the state legislature approved legislation to provide additional funding for the school and designated it as a normal school to produce teachers.

During the next Corps trip ordered by Richardson to Richmond in 1850, the Corps attended the ceremonies with the laying of the corner-stone of the Washington monument. By this time, the Corps (organized into a battalion organization of two companies) had attained a remarkable degree of military proficiency under Major Gilham. The Corps served as bodyguard to President Zachary Taylor during the ceremony and the President, as mentioned above, ordered the United States Ordnance Department to supply new rifles to the Corps. At the closing ceremonies, the state of

Virginia presented a battalion flag to the Corps, which they carried throughout the Civil War. The Corps continued on to Norfolk and returned to VMI almost a month after they had left, the longest trip taken by the Corps before the Civil War.<sup>43</sup> Immediately after the cadets departed Richmond, the state legislature appropriated \$46,000 to build new cadet barracks. Smith was fully aware of the extraordinary aid rendered by the Corps of Cadets in passage of this legislation. Another trip was taken by the Corps to Richmond in 1856.

In 1858, the Washington monument was finished and ready for dedication in Richmond. Richardson again ordered the Corps back to Richmond. The hundred and forty-two cadets “swept all before it in soldierly appearance and action, and their gentlemanly conduct.”<sup>44</sup> The Corps escorted the governor, Henry Wise and was reviewed by the Governor and the Guest of Honor, General Winfield Scott.

By 1859 these trips had accomplished their mission of promoting the Corps and in securing the necessary funding from the state legislature. VMI and her Corps of Cadets were seen by many citizens and legislators as the premier military organization in the state. In addition, these trips had an unintended consequence for the cadets. They allowed the cadets to see first hand the logistical organization that it took to move a large body of men and materials long distances, usually in winter conditions.

Through the efforts of Majors Gilham and Jackson, the VMI Corps of Cadets became the best military organization in the state of Virginia by the late 1850s. This fact, combined with trips throughout Virginia, established VMI’s reputation as the expert in military matters. Events would soon call upon VMI to further aid the state of Virginia in real world matters and VMI would play a very important role in preparing Virginia for the upcoming Civil War.

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<sup>1</sup>William Couper, *One Hundred Years at VMI*, I, 78.

<sup>2</sup>Edwin L. Dooley, Jr., "Smith and VMI on the Eve of the Civil War," in *A Crowd of Honorable Youth*, ed. Thomas W. Davis et al. (Lexington: VMI, 1989), 20.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>4</sup>Andrew C. L. Gatewood to Parents, 25 August 1860, Andrew C. L. Gatewood Papers, Virginia Military Institute Archives, Lexington, Virginia.

<sup>5</sup>Richard M. McMurry, *Virginia Military Institute Alumni in the Civil War* (Lynchburg: Howard, 1999), 23.

<sup>6</sup>Regulations for the Virginia Military Institute at Lexington, Virginia (Richmond: Macfarlane and Fergusson, 1854), 15.

<sup>7</sup>James Lee Conrad, *The Young Lions Confederate Cadets at War* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 1997), 18.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>9</sup>Regulations for the Virginia Military Institute, 74.

<sup>10</sup>Dooley, 22.

<sup>11</sup>Couper, Vol. 1, 352.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>13</sup>West Point Professor Mahan recommended Lieutenant W. S. Rosecrans, then an instructor at West Point, for the position.

<sup>14</sup>Thomas, a Virginian, did not join the Confederacy and rose to become a general in the Union Army. He is famous for being the "Rock of Chickamauga." Thomas' family in Virginia always spoke of Thomas in the past tense after he cast his lot with the North.

<sup>15</sup>There is some confusion on whether Gilham was at this post when he was offered the job at VMI. In Wise's *Military History of the Virginia Military Institute*, Gilham was teaching at West Point when offered the VMI position but Couper's *One Hundred Years* has Gilham's teaching at West Point before going to fight in Mexico.

<sup>16</sup>Couper, Vol. 1 158.

<sup>17</sup>Jennings C. Wise, *The Military History of the Virginia Military Institute* (Bell: Lynchburg, 1915), 55.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>19</sup>Francis H. Smith III, “Old Spex of the VMI” (Unpublished manuscript, 1941), 78.

<sup>20</sup>Francis H. Smith, *History of the Virginia Military Institute* (Evergreen: New York, 1912), 111.

<sup>21</sup>James T. Murfee to Thomas T. Munford, 18 July 1903, Munford-Ellis Family Papers, Duke University.

<sup>22</sup>Gilham also provided many other services to VMI including starting an agricultural program and installing gas lights in barracks before the Civil War. The gas lights were some of the first in the state of Virginia.

<sup>23</sup>Among the names considered for the position were George B. McClellan and William Rosecrans.

<sup>24</sup>Wise, 69.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>26</sup>While Jackson was seen as a failure as a teacher, some historians believe that Jackson was no better or worse than other instructors at West Point or VMI but that he was an unengaging teacher. As historian Jennifer Green wrote, “Most of the perceptions about Professor Thomas Jackson as a poor teacher came after his successes as General Stonewall Jackson, his death, and the creation of a myth. Some critics claimed that Jackson was unprepared to teach his subject, but there is no evidence for this charge. To the contrary, he worked on improving his teaching. The textbooks in his library illustrate a man who could revise formulas, make the working more direct and even translate the ideas into Spanish.” Jennifer R. Green, “From West Point to the Virginia Military Institute,” *Virginia Cavalcade* 49, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 134-144.

<sup>27</sup>Smith III, *Old Spex of the VMI*, 80.

<sup>28</sup>Green, 142.

<sup>29</sup>James I. Robertson Jr., *Stonewall Jackson, The Man, The Soldier, The Legend* (Macmillan: New York, 1997), 122.

<sup>30</sup>The cadet, James Walker, Class of 1852, served under Jackson during the war and became the last surviving commanding general of the Stonewall Brigade.

<sup>31</sup>Green, 143. Green points out that most of these court-martials were in the early years of Jackson’s tenure with the last one taking place in 1856.

<sup>32</sup>Smith III, *Old Spex of the VMI*, 80.

<sup>33</sup>James Dabney McCabe, *The Life of Thomas J. Jackson, by an Ex-cadet*. (Richmond: James E. Goode, 1864), 24.

<sup>34</sup>Couper, 168.

<sup>35</sup>James Robertson's biography on Thomas Jackson contains the following story about using cadets as horses – "Joseph Hambrick once had to perform the troublesome duty of pulling one of the cannon. Across the field came Jackson's loud directive: "Limbers and caissons pass your pieces, trot, march!" Hambrick failed to move promptly and Jackson put him on report for "not trotting at artillery drill." When asked for an excuse, Hambrick wrote: "I am a natural pacer." Robertson, 124.

<sup>36</sup>The four cannons are now located on the VMI parade field below Sir Moses Ezekiel's statue of Jackson.

<sup>37</sup>Cooper, 147.

<sup>38</sup>Keith E. Gibson and George E. Whiting, "Little Drill Guns, Unsited for War, The Story of the 1851 VMI Cadet Muskets," *North South Trader's Civil War*, September-October 1995, 55-60.

<sup>39</sup>As state librarian, Richardson gave duplicate copies of books located in the state library in Richmond to the newly formed VMI, establishing the schools library.

<sup>40</sup>Smith III, *Old Spex of the VMI*, 76. This passage was in the rough draft for Smith's *History of the Virginia Military Institute* but not in the final book.

<sup>41</sup>Couper, 89.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 328.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE EXECUTION OF JOHN BROWN AND PREPARATIONS FOR WAR

Despite the worsening differences between the Deep Southern slave states and the free states in the North, the state of Virginia by the late 1850s had managed to steer a course of neutrality. As one historian wrote, “the State of Virginia sided neither with the sanctimonious Abolitionist of the North nor the rabid secessionist of the deep South.”<sup>1</sup> However, events in late 1859 would cause the state of Virginia to re-evaluate its position in the sectional conflict and force the state into making preparations for a possible civil war. Playing a large role in these events and preparations, including the school’s first military expedition, was the faculty and cadets of the Virginia Military Institute.

In its first twenty years existence, the reputation of VMI had gained a high reputation in the state and throughout the south in both academics and in military arts.

Academically, VMI taught courses that concentrated on mathematics, engineering, and mechanics, one of the few colleges in the South that offered these courses. VMI also produced a large number of teachers who taught in Virginia and throughout the South.<sup>2</sup> From 1842 to 1859, VMI produced 160 teachers and fifty-two civil engineers.<sup>3</sup> VMI trained teachers either established or taught at military schools in all the Southern and border states. When hired to teach at nonmilitary schools, the alumnus often established a military program.<sup>4</sup> As a result, VMI and its academic and military system were well known throughout the South.

The school’s military success was due to two of its instructors, the Commandant of Cadets and Instructor of Infantry tactics, Major William Gilham and the Instructor of

Artillery Tactics Major Thomas J. Jackson. Both were graduates of West Point and had served in the War with Mexico. Trips around the state in the 1840s and 1850s demonstrating marching and drilling skills for both the state legislature and the public further cemented the reputation of VMI as the premier military organization in the state by 1859.

By the late 1850s, the differences between slave and free states was dominating the national scene. Talk about secession had been a live topic in the United States since 1847.<sup>5</sup> Virginia, while sharing some views with other slave holding states in the Deep South, was still pro-Union at the beginning of 1859. However, events at the end of 1859 would cause Virginia to move closer towards the secessionist views held by the Deep South states.

On Sunday, 16 October 1859, John Brown with a small band of twenty-two antislavery zealots seized the United States Armory at Harpers Ferry. Located at the lower end of the Shenandoah Valley, it was only 150 miles from Lexington. Brown's objective was to seize the weapons at the arsenal and then arm and lead thousands of slaves in rebellion against Southern slave owners. A train conductor briefly detained by Brown's men sent a telegram after being released. By the next day, the President of the United States and Governor Wise of Virginia had been notified of Brown's actions. Within twelve hours, sixteen militia companies had assembled near Harpers Ferry from both Virginia and Maryland. Fighting occurred on the afternoon of the seventeenth with the militia companies forcing Brown and his men from the armory to a near-by engine house.<sup>6</sup> President Buchanan sent a detachment of Marines from the Washington Navy Yard and Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee, US Army, took command of all Federal



troops in Harpers Ferry. Lee offered the privilege of making the assault to both the Maryland and Virginia militias, but both deferred to Lee. The next morning, the Marines, led by Lee and Lieutenant Green, rushed the engine-house and quickly subdued Brown and his followers. All of Brown's followers were killed except Brown and three others. Not a single slave had flocked to Brown's call for rebellion.

A week after his capture, John Brown was brought to trial in Charlestown, Virginia, for treason to the Commonwealth, conspiring with slaves to commit treason and murder.<sup>7</sup> On 2 November 1859, Brown was found guilty of the charges brought against him and sentenced to hang on 2 December.

Brown's raid sent shock waves through the state of Virginia. A Virginian and West Point graduate, John C. Tidball wrote about the raid: "Although the enterprise failed so signally, it carried consternation through the South and deep excitement in the North. More than any other event which had up to this time happened, this intensified the bad feeling then existing between the two sections."<sup>8</sup> Southern newspapers reported that in many parts of the North, churches held services of humiliation and prayers; bells were tolled for John Brown. Northern newspapers called Brown a "most true Christian" and Northern poets, among them Whittier, Emerson and Longfellow, were writing heroic poems about him. A great change of feeling took place in Virginia towards the Union and the North. After the raid, "Virginians began to look upon the people of the North as hating them, as willing to see them assassinated at midnight by their own slaves, led by Northern emissaries; as flinging aside all pretense, or regard of laws protecting the slave-owner; as demanding of them the immediate freeing of their slaves."<sup>9</sup>

It was in this atmosphere that reports surfaced throughout Virginia that Brown's supporters and sympathizers were going to seize other arsenals, kidnap Governor Wise and liberate Brown either before or during his execution. Governor Wise instructed the head of Virginia militia, Major General William B. Taliaferro, to have a strong state military force at the execution to intimidate any would-be rescuers and to preserve law and order.<sup>10</sup>

In Lexington, Virginia, the seizure of Harpers Ferry seemed eerily familiar to Smith. The cadet guard at the arsenal had been increased in the fall of 1858 due to rumors of a plot to seize the Lexington arsenal, arming a number of slaves in the area and starting a servile insurrection among the slaves in Virginia.<sup>11</sup>

In early November 1859, Smith, acting as the commander of the State Arsenal at Lexington and part of the military establishment of the state, sent a letter to Governor Wise and Adjutant General Richardson offering the services of the VMI Corps of Cadets to maintain law and order during the execution of Brown. This offer by Smith did present some problems for the Governor. The cadets at VMI were recognized as a part of the Public Guard or Militia only to the extent of guarding the arsenal at Lexington. Furthermore, the commissions of the officers at the Institute pertained only to the Arsenal and the VMI, not within the state militia.<sup>12</sup> Finally, there was some question whether the parents of the cadets, who had sent their sons to VMI to receive an education, would allow them to be employed in such a manner. Richardson wrote to Smith telling him that the Governor thanked him for tendering the services of the cadets but there was at present no need for them. Richardson added, however, that Smith was to keep the cadets ready to march if the Governor decided additional support was needed.

Richardson, through his long association with VMI and Smith, believed the cadets were needed and did not let the matter drop with Governor Wise. Richardson lavished praise upon the Corps of Cadets, particularly on its proficiency in handling artillery. Richardson also proposed placing Colonel Smith in command of the execution.<sup>13</sup> In a letter to the Governor on 17 November, Richardson wrote:

Of the efficiency of such a detachment of the corps of Cadets I have no doubt unless it shall be that the first class, which began the study of artillery tactics at the commencement of the academic course on 1st Sept. last, has not yet been sufficiently trainee in the artillery schools of practice, but whether so or not, it would be the most effective force in the use of Howitzers that you can now command. It may be that whilst the cadets themselves would eagerly embrace the opportunity for the service you would thus afford them, parents and guardians might object on the ground that they are at the Institute for purposes of scientific and military education only and bound for no military service to the State but as a guard to the arsenal.<sup>14</sup>

Smith sent a letter to the Governor two days later. In regard to the Corps of Cadets, he stated that:

It was from the conviction that in all the essential elements of military defense they were better prepared than any other portion of the military of the State. More than this, I believe that the sentiment of any parent would respond to this patriotic duty on behalf of the sons, in giving protection to their own homes and firesides from the wicked assaults of incendiary and mid-night marauders.<sup>15</sup>

At VMI, Smith issued a General Order detailing a portion of the Corps, made up from the senior and junior class, for special duty and to “hold themselves in readiness to take up the line of march at a moment’s notice.”<sup>16</sup> The infantry troops would be under the command of Gilham while the artillery section would be under the command of Jackson. Academic duties were suspended and special drills were held. But on 20 November, Governor Wise telegraphed Smith from Charlestown that the Corps was not needed.

Finally, on 22 November, the telegram that Smith had urgently been hoping for arrived. Governor Wise ordered the cadets and “his corps of Howitzers . . . by the first of

December next” to report to Charlestown.<sup>17</sup> Smith was ordered to come ahead of the Corps and act as the superintendent of the execution while Taliaferro would exercise overall command of the assembled Virginia forces.<sup>18</sup> It is unknown what caused Wise to finally request the services of the Corps but further discussions with Richardson concerning the cadet’s competence with artillery probably swayed the Governor.

Smith was overjoyed. He and his Corps of Cadets were going to play a role in the execution of John Brown, the enemy of the state of Virginia. VMI was finally to provide a vital service to the state which had founded it. In his response to the Governor, Smith stated:

I have kept a detachment of the corps of cadets, 80 in number with a battery of Howitzers, ready for service at a moments call, and I beg leave to state that the command is provided with all the appliances for taking care of themselves upon the field of duty now claiming their services. The commissary has his cooks and cooking implements in order and we are thus in a state of preparation much more complete than that attending an ordinary militia command. In addition, it gives me pleasure to state that Messrs. Harman and Co. have placed their stages and entire stock at Lexington and Staunton at my command, and they will transport my detachment at a moments call, free of charge. This tender is very creditable to these gentlemen and I mention it specially to you, as showing the patriotic spirit that actuates them. These facilities will enable me to reach Winchester in twenty hours after notice and you may therefore, rely upon dispatch in our movements as soon as ordered. I am at your service for duty in advance of the corps.<sup>19</sup>

From the content of Smith’s reply to Wise, it is clear that despite being told numerous times that the corps would not been needed, Smith believed that they would eventually be called for state service and had made as many advanced preparations as possible. This is the first example what would become a common occurrence during the Civil War; Smith’s tendency to be very over zealous in offering and using the Corps of Cadets as a military unit, suspending academic duty and without receiving parental permission. Oddly enough, the Board of Visitors did not complain about Smith’s actions,

instead inserting into the next board meetings minutes a letter written by a mother of three of the cadets at the John Brown execution with her satisfaction of their service to the state of Virginia.<sup>20</sup>

On the evening of 25 November, eighty-five cadets and two Howitzers departed Lexington for Charlestown with Gilham commanding sixty-four cadets and Jackson commanding twenty-one cadets of the artillery unit. Taking the train from Staunton, Virginia, the cadets passed through Richmond and Washington, DC, before finally arriving in Charlestown on the twenty-eighth of November. A reporter from the *Richmond Daily Dispatch* wrote of the cadet's arrival, "The cadets are to be here by the next train – half past two, I wish very much to see them on active duty. They have a high reputation and I suspect will be the best drilled troops on the ground."<sup>21</sup> After the cadets arrived the same reporter wrote, "The cadets were the lions yesterday, and they certainly deserve it for they are drilled to a marvelous degree of perfection. I do not think older persons could be taught the exercise as they are."<sup>22</sup> The cadets joined over 650 soldiers from the US Army and the Virginia Militia. In addition, 600 armed men were in the immediate towns and the Governor had ordered that all citizens in the region remain at home to guard their possessions against possible violence.<sup>23</sup>

The cadets in Charlestown fell into a schedule of reveille at 6:00 am, breakfast at 7:30 am, guard mounting at 8:30 am, dinner at 2:00 pm, dress parade at 3:30 pm and retreat at 6:00 pm. The cadets were restricted to quarters after retreat. Orders were issued that "every cadet will have his musket in perfect firing order, for inspection . . . and 12 rounds of ball cartridges in good order in his cartridge box. The cadets will lie down in their clothes and accoutrements, warning for any emergency."<sup>24</sup>

On 2 December, a small crowd assembled on a clear, warm Friday for the hanging. The military far outnumbered civilians in attendance.<sup>25</sup> A spectator observed that, “Everything was conducted under the strictest military discipline, as if (Charlestown) were in a state of siege.”<sup>26</sup> By 9:00 am, military units had taken position at the gallows in U-shaped formation.<sup>27</sup> The VMI cadets were stationed immediately in the rear of the gallows and wore gray trousers and red flannel shirts crossed by two white belts.<sup>28</sup> Among the cadets was “an old gray-haired gentleman, whose long silvery locks hung over the cape of his cadet overcoat.”<sup>29</sup> The gentleman was Edmund Ruffin, a veteran of the War of 1812 and a leading secessionist. Two years later at the age of 68, Ruffin, as a private in the Palmetto Guards, would pull the lanyard firing the first shot of the Civil War at Fort Sumter.

The cadet artillery section under Jackson was also placed forty yards behind the execution scaffold, a howitzer on either side to sweep the field.<sup>30</sup> Another VMI officer, Lieutenant Scott Ship, commented, “Major Jackson gave Lieutenant Trueheart the most detailed instructions as to what kind of ammunition to use under various contingencies, even directing how the fuses should be cut, should the enemy advance in this or in that direction!...The explicit nature of his preparations shows he was unwilling to be surprised, or found unprepared, in the most remote contingency.”<sup>31</sup> Brown was led to the gallows at 11:00 am and the sentence was carried out at 11:30 am without incident.

The cadets were kept in Charlestown for three additional days then ordered by Governor Wise to Richmond. On 8 December, the cadet artillery drilled at the Capital Square for spectators, legislators and the Governor then returned to VMI on 10 December.

The John Brown raid had a dramatic effect on the citizens in the state of Virginia. The raid was heavily discussed and public debates and forums were held. New militia companies were formed around the state to defend against future attacks. VMI Major J. T. L. Preston, present at Brown's execution, wrote afterwards:

But the moral of the scene was its grand point. A sovereign state had been assailed, and she had uttered but a hint, and her sons had hastened to show that they were ready to defend her. Law had been violated by actual murder and attempted treason and that gibbet was erected by law, and to uphold law was this military force assembled. But, greater still – God's Holy Law and righteous Providence was vindicated, "Thou shalt not kill." . . . And here the gray-haired man of violence meets his fate, after he has seen his two sons cut down before him, in the same career of violence into which he had introduced them. So perish all enemies of Virginia! All such enemies of the Union! All such foes of the human race!<sup>32</sup>

The Virginia General Assembly also took action to prepare the state for war. On 21 January 1860 they appropriated \$500,000 for the manufacture and purchase of arms and munitions of war. The administrators of the act, named the Commission of Public Safety, would be a commission of three members, appointed by the Governor. Governor Wise appointed Colonel Philip Cocke, Captain George Randolph and VMI Superintendent Colonel Francis Smith to the post. Both Cocke and Smith were graduates of West Point and Randolph was a graduate of the United States Naval Academy.

The three members threw themselves into the task, soon traveling with Governor Wise on a ten day trip through the North where they visited arm makers in Springfield, Harpers Ferry, Wilmington and the West Point Foundry. At the West Point Foundry, Robert P. Parrott, a personal friend of Smith, demonstrated for the commissioners an experimental rifled field piece. Smith asked Parrott if he would ship one of the pieces to VMI for further testing and Parrott agreed. The field piece reached VMI in July 1860 but was not tested until September. For the test, Jackson and his cadet gunners fired the gun

at tent flies across what is now the Maury River.<sup>33</sup> Jackson, amazed by their accuracy and range, immediately recommended the commissioners purchase more guns.<sup>34</sup> The state purchased twelve of the field pieces.<sup>35</sup> The Commission continued its work through most of 1860, buying modern arms (rifled muskets) and powder for the state. The work of the Commission also meant that Smith was away from VMI for large parts of the year.

The state soon tasked another member of VMI's faculty. Shortly after the cadets returned to VMI from the Brown execution, the Governor detailed Gilham to "prepare a synoptically work for the instruction of the militia service. He will in as short space as possible plainly describe in his own way the duties of officers, field and company, adding matter at his own discretion."<sup>36</sup> At the time, Scott's *Infantry Tactics* (in use at West Point and VMI) and the recent *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics*, by Colonel Hardee were the only drill manuals available. The new militias forming around the state, however, wanted a manual not only to provide instruction for various arms but in giving forms of reports, requisitions, muster-rolls and pay-rolls necessary for new citizen-soldiers units.<sup>37</sup> By November 1860, Gilham had finished a manual 743 pages long, not the "short space" the Governor directed.<sup>38</sup> The manual was a very inclusive work containing chapters on everything from Army Organization and Arms, Evolutions of the Regiment to Honors and Ceremonies. The manual was used for a short time by the United States Army before the war and then for the duration of the war by the Confederate Army.

Other acts were passed by the state legislature in 1860 that affected VMI. An act passed in March 1860 stated that "it appearing further that the Corps of Cadets, in the course of their regular military education, may readily be employed to prepare munitions of war, as may be demanded by the wants of the State."<sup>39</sup> Under a separate Militia Bill



(Virginia Code of 1860) passed in April 1860, officers of the Virginia Military Institute were recognized as a part of the military of the State, and the governor was authorized to issue commissions to them in accordance with the regulations of the Institute – but the commissions conferred no rank in the active militia.<sup>40</sup> The Board of Visitors also changed the status of cadets in the spring of 1860. In notifying new cadets of their appointments to the school, the Board sent the following message: “The Board of Visitors deem it their duty explicitly to announce to the corps of cadets that when a cadet enters the Virginia Military Institute, he enters the service of the State, under the military command of those appointed to govern it, and that he is not subject to the control of his parents except in subordination to the laws and authority of the Institute.”<sup>41</sup>

Further changes were also taking place at VMI. The Chair of Military Strategy, Major Raleigh E. Colston, accepted a commission with a local militia unit after the John Brown execution. Based on the drilling he did with his new unit, Colston believed that the cadets would be ill prepared to perform additional military services in the future. He wrote to the Superintendent that cadets knew all about drilling squads, companies or battalions but did not know about taking care of men on marches or in a camp. Cadets, explained Colston, have “gone through the Institute without having so much as seen a cartridge or heard of a knapsack.”<sup>42</sup> Colston recommended that the cadet musket be replaced with the Minnie musket; that heavy shoes and socks be provided; firing practice to be held every Saturday morning; that four practice marches be held during specific months with knapsacks loaded and that one practice march be conducted in the winter. Additionally, instruction and exercise in sword and bayonet training, firing projectiles from cannons and training in cartridge making was recommended.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the worsening sectional tensions, most of the faculty at VMI was pro-Union in 1860. The West Point graduates, having served in the Army and many in the war with Mexico, still wanted to see the country remain intact. However, they (with the exception of Gilham who was from Indiana) were also Virginians and believed that their state and way of life was being threatened by outside influences.

On Christmas Eve 1859, Smith wrote to a friend, “Alas. Has it come to this? Preparing for war? Civil War? War against our brethren & friends. And yet wicked men are driving the country to such an issue. May God in his mercy avert such a calamity.”<sup>44</sup> Smith believed that slavery was morally defensible. In 1856, he wrote that, “Every citizen should be instructed . . . in the science of government and [I] especially believe it essential that he should understand and believe the foundation of that divine institution of slavery, which is the basis of the happiness, prosperity and independence of the Southern People, and thoroughly prepared to advocate and defend it.”<sup>45</sup> Smith speaking at a debate in Lexington after the 1860 presidential election and the succession of South Carolina defended the actions of South Carolina and further declared that the South was justified in seceding; that any state should be allowed to secede without interference; Virginia could not maintain her constitutional rights in the Union if other Southern States seceded; and to secure these guarantees a general convention of all the States should be held as provided by the Constitution of the United States.<sup>46</sup> Stories soon appeared in Richmond papers that Smith had made a secession speech and that he was pro-secession. Some legislators declared that they would appropriate no more money for VMI where “treason was taught.”<sup>47</sup> Smith defended his actions and with the support of his friends in the legislature, the “crisis” soon passed.

In the fall of 1860, VMI appeared to have a bright future ahead. New structures were being built and planned, new academic programs and advanced schools of agriculture and civil engineering were being developed and the Board of Visitors approved of the admission of cadets from other states. However, events were causing the role of VMI to evolve from a focus on academics to military preparations. These preparations would have a tremendous benefit for both the state of Virginia and the Confederate States of America in the near future. But for now, VMI and the state of Virginia remained in the Union. A cadet wrote to his sister in the fall of 1860 about the rumors of war; “All I have said, Dear sister, amounts to a mere probability, believe me. There will be no such issue as these extravagant fanatics prophesy. We consider it as trifling talk, but have preparedness in case of an emergency. We have commenced the skirmish drill and cartridges have been distributed to the amount of twenty-five hundred. But believe me in the whole, it will amount to nothing.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Francis H. Smith, III, “Old Spex of the VMI” (Unpublished manuscript, 1941), 54.

<sup>2</sup>Due to legislation passed in 1842, young men whose families did not have the means to send them to college were provided with board, tuition and supplies without charge, in exchange for two years of public service, usually as teachers, after graduation.

<sup>3</sup>William Couper, *One Hundred Years at VMI*, II, 1.

<sup>4</sup>Bruce Allardice, “West Points of the Confederacy: Southern Military Schools and the Confederate Army,” *Civil War History*, December 1997, 312.

<sup>5</sup>Henry T. Shanks, *The Secession Movement in Virginia* (Richmond: Garrett, 1934), 25.

<sup>6</sup>Couper, II, 4.

<sup>7</sup>Both of Brown's appointed lawyers had a connection with VMI. Charles J. Faulkner was a former member of the VMI Board of Visitors and Lawson Botts was a member of the VMI Class of 1844.

<sup>8</sup>Joseph C. Tidball, "Getting Through West Point," handwritten memoir, John Caldwell Tidball Papers, USMA, 58.

<sup>9</sup>Smith, III, "Old Spex of the VMI," 130.

<sup>10</sup>Richard M. McMurry, *Virginia Military Institute Alumni in the Civil War* (Lynchburg: Howard, 1999), 32-33.

<sup>11</sup>Jennings C. Wise, *The Military History of the Virginia Military Institute* (Lynchburg: Bell, 1915), 108.

<sup>12</sup>Smith, III, "Old Spex of the VMI," 130.

<sup>13</sup>Couper, II, 7.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>18</sup>McMurry, 33.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>20</sup>The letter stated - "November 29, 1859. My dear Boys - to think you are in camp preparing for war and civil war, too! What a calamity! Yet it would not recall you if I could. I believe this is the hour of trial to all that love the Old Dominion, and I would not have one of my sons prove recreant to his native state. I have given you up cheerfully to God, and prayed his protecting care, and my trust is in Him to preserve and bring you back safely. I write to tell you that we have an eye turned toward you, and that our prayers go up for you." Below the letter, the Board of Visitors added: "With such mothers of their men and such training of her sons given at the Mil Inst, Virginia will ever be able to defend herself against the enemies of her rights and peace whether these enemies arise amongst foreign, the seditious and transmobile in our midst or appear as a foe." Board of Visitors Minutes, July 1860, VMI Archives, 277.

<sup>21</sup>*Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 30 November 1859.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>Richardson, 198.

<sup>24</sup>Couper, II, 14. During a “Grand Round” by General Taliaferro, he criticized the cadets for not turning out for guard duty in a snappy manner. The next night, the cadets overacted and turned out quickly bringing commendation to the officers and cadets.

<sup>25</sup>Smith, 170.

<sup>26</sup>*Lexington Gazette*, 8 Dec 1859.

<sup>27</sup>Robertson, 198.

<sup>28</sup>Starting in 1887, to commemorate the cadet’s service, the lining of the capes of the gray cadet overcoats were made of red flannel and are turned back during parades and special events. The tradition continues to this day.

<sup>29</sup>W. N. Mercer Otey, *Confederate Veteran*, VII-120 (March, 1899).

<sup>30</sup>Robertson, 198.

<sup>31</sup>Wise, 112-113.

<sup>32</sup>Couper, 19.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>34</sup>Another witness to the rifled piece experiment was Rev. William Pendleton, future Chief of Artillery for the Army of Northern Virginia.

<sup>35</sup>Wise, 119.

<sup>36</sup>Couper, 25.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>38</sup>Richardson implored Gilham to prepare an abstract because of the high cost, “neither the state nor the officers will by it.” When it was published the text was 559 pages long. Couper, 27.

<sup>39</sup>Wise, 116.

<sup>40</sup>Couper, 42.

<sup>41</sup>Board of Visitors Minutes, 1853-1864, VMI Archives, 250 and McMurry, 34.

<sup>42</sup>Couper, 25.

<sup>43</sup>James Lee Conrad, *The Young Lions Confederate Cadets at War* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 1997), 33.

<sup>44</sup>Francis H. Smith to Rt. Rev. Charles P. McIlvaine, 24 Dec. 1859, Superintendent's Records: Outgoing Correspondence, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.

<sup>45</sup>Smith, III, "Old Spex of VMI," 56.

<sup>46</sup>Couper, 63.

<sup>47</sup>Conrad, 34.

<sup>48</sup>Thomas A. Stevenson to sister, 20 November 1860, Thomas A. Stevenson Collection, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE EARLY WAR YEARS, 1861-1862

The overwhelming majority of cadets at Virginia Military Institute (VMI) were pro-Southern and pro-secession in sentiment. The same was true of the students at nearby Washington College. Most of the cadets and students were swept up in the “long stream of anti-Northern statements pouring forth from ‘Southern Rights’ spokesmen in the press, pulpits, classrooms, and political forums of the region.”<sup>1</sup> A cadet wrote to his parents in early March 1861:

Well old Abe has taken his seat. I wonder what will be done now. I suppose Virginia will either have to go North or South now, there is no choice to save the Union so she might as well secede now as any other time. . . . I hope Va will secede.<sup>2</sup>

Many professors and administrators at both schools shared these sentiments, including the Superintendent of VMI, Francis H. Smith.<sup>3</sup> The opposite was true for the town of Lexington and surrounding Rockbridge County. Lexington was more conservative and “Unionist” in sentiment. The state’s governor, John Letcher, a Lexington lawyer and pro-Unionist, had narrowly been elected in 1860. In the 1860 Presidential Election, over eighty-three percent of the voters in Rockbridge County cast their ballots for candidates that favored moderation.<sup>4</sup> In reaction to Lincoln’s election, the Virginia legislature met in extra session in January 1861 and authorized the election of delegates to a state convention to consider secession. Soon after, Letcher reluctantly issued the proclamation for counties to elect delegates.<sup>5</sup>

In response to a near riot between a pro-secession group, containing cadets, and a pro-Union group on 13 April 1861, Smith and other professors addressed the Corps of

Cadets. The speakers stressed they had sympathetic views but the cadets could not take arms against other Virginians. The last professor to address the cadets was Major Thomas Jackson. Jackson told the cadets:

Military men make short speeches, and as for myself I am no hand at speaking, anyhow. The time for war has not yet come, but it will come, and that soon; and when it does come, my advice is to draw the sword and throw away the scabbard.<sup>6</sup>

The cadets did not have to wait long. Fort Sumter was bombarded by Confederate forces on 15 April and surrendered thirty-six hours later.<sup>7</sup> That same day, President Lincoln called on states to furnish 75,000 troops in accordance with a 1795 act “to execute the laws of the Union, suppress rebellions, repel invasions.”<sup>8</sup> Virginia’s contribution was to be three regiments totaling 2,340 men. Despite doing everything he could to keep secessionist hysteria under control and the Old Dominion in the Union, Letcher realized there could be no more neutrality on the secession issue. Letcher sent a telegram to Lincoln in response to the troop call:

In reply to this communication I have only to say, that the militia of Virginia will not be furnished to the powers at Washington for any such use or purposes as they have in view. Your object is to subjugate the Southern States, and a requisition made upon me for such an object – an object, in my judgment, not within the purview of the Constitution, or the Act of 1795 - will not be complied with. You have chosen to inaugurate civil war, and having done so, we will meet it in a spirit as determined as the Administration has exhibited towards the South.<sup>9</sup>

On 16 April, the Virginia secession convention, which had rejected secession by a firm majority earlier in the month, passed a preliminary resolution for the secession of the state from the Union. The next day the convention voted eighty-eight to fifty-five to leave the Union. The Act of Secession was deliberately kept secret until the afternoon of the eighteenth, in order for Virginia militia forces to seize the arsenal and military stores at Harpers Ferry.<sup>10</sup>



Since Lexington did not have a telegraph line, the news that Fort Sumter had surrendered, Lincoln's request for troops, Letcher's response and the preliminary actions of the state secession convention arrived with a courier from Staunton within hours of each other the evening of the sixteenth. The mood at VMI was celebratory. Smith, as he had done during the John Brown raid, quickly sent a letter to the governor on the evening of 16 April, before the state had actually succeeded, regarding the Cadet Corps. As before, Smith offered the use of the Corps of Cadets but with an added twist. Smith wrote:

Telegraphic news has just reached us that the Convention of Virginia has passed a preliminary resolution for the secession of the State from the Federal Union. I shall receive with prompt alacrity the orders of the Convention as they may be communicated to me through the Governor, but I deem it my duty to the State, at once and without reserve to tender the services of the officers and cadets of this Institution for any duty to which the necessities of the State may call us. But if your Excellency will authorize me to organize a regiment of volunteer troops composed of the present Corps of Cadets, ex-cadets, students of the University and colleges of the State, I can raise a command of 1,200 chosen troops in 15 days. I await your Excellency's orders.<sup>11</sup>

Smith had again offered the Corps of Cadets for state service without obtaining the necessary Board of Visitors or cadet parent's permission. Smith later justified his actions in his annual report to the Board of Visitors:

With the view of enabling the Institution to render to the State all the military service possible in the war of invasion and subjugation with which we were threatened by the Government at Washington. I deemed it my duty to tender to the Governor the services of all the officers and cadets for any duty to which they might be called. Considering the organized condition of the Corps of Cadets as a battalion of four companies in the best condition as to discipline and instruction it was my desire that they should be first in the field in their battalion organization and that by combining with the Corps of Cadets such ex-cadets and other who might be volunteers for the service a most effective Regiment might be formed.<sup>12</sup>

Smith's offer of forming a cadet battalion is interesting. Using the cadets as soldiers went against the mission of VMI which Smith had been Superintendent of for

over twenty years; the mission of educating young men which in time of war would serve as officers and instructors in the state armed forces. Smith also had no problem leading his students into battle, the youngest cadets only sixteen years of age, with himself in command. Throughout the war, Smith would continue to volunteer the services of the Corps of Cadets to serve as soldiers, a poor use of cadets in training to be future officers.

On 17 April, Smith received a dispatch from the Adjutant General advising him, “The Governor requests that you will come here as soon as you possibly can. He wants your counsel and advice particularly.”<sup>13</sup> Smith immediately left Lexington and reached Richmond within two days and on the twenty-first the Governor appointed him to the Council of Three. The Council of Three was “appointed by the Convention upon the nomination of the Governor, to aid, council and advise him in the exercise of the executive authority in the present emergency, the said council to continue in office at the discretion of this body.”<sup>14</sup> Besides Smith, the other members of the Board were Judge John J. Allen and Captain Matthew F. Maury.<sup>15</sup> The Board would consume the next few months of Smith’s life and Major J. T. L. Preston was made Acting Superintendent of VMI. Preston wrote to his wife from Richmond, “Colonel Smith is occupying here a very important and laborious position, and is acquiring a very enviable reputation for the value of his services.”<sup>16</sup> Among the more important decisions of the Board was the recommendation to the governor to tender to Colonel Robert E. Lee the office of commander of the military and naval forces of Virginia; establishing a joint commission of army and navy officers “to name all efficient and worthy Virginians and residents of Virginia in the Army and Navy of the United States, for the purpose of inviting them into the service of Virginia;” and tendering to President Davis the services of the officers of

the Army and Navy who had retired from “the service of the late United States” and entered the service of Virginia.<sup>17</sup> The Board also organized the armed forces of the state of Virginia into the State’s Provisional Army, Volunteers and Militia.<sup>18</sup>

Back in Lexington and Rockbridge county, pro-union sentiment had gone to secessionist fervor in just four days. A Lexington citizen remarked, “The divided spirits on Saturday were one on Wednesday.”<sup>19</sup> Lexington, the “steady-going” town was suddenly “metamorphosed into a bustling military camp.”<sup>20</sup> Preston put the Institute on a war footing on 17 April. A cadet wrote on 18 April, “We have drilled 3 times today. We have suspended all Academic duty except Tactics. All of us are studying Tactics. We don’t do anything at all but study Tactics and drill.”<sup>21</sup> VMI Order Number 61 was published on 18 April 1861 and stated the new cadet daily routine:

The following is the order of exercises until further orders:

Drill at Battery daily, from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m.

2nd Class Mil. Engineering, from 8 to 10 a.m.

4th Class, Inf’ty Tactics, from 8 to 10 and 2 to 3.

3rd Class art. Tactics, from 9 to 10 a.m.

4th Class Mortar and Rifle Cannon Drill, 6 to 7 a.m.

Battalion Drill, from 3 to 4 p.m. daily.

Artillery Tactics, 8 to 9 a.m. daily.

Strategy, from 10 to 11 daily.

Light Infantry, from 10 to 11 a.m.

First and Second class in the Laboratory, from 11 to 1.

By order of Major Preston.<sup>22</sup>

VMI was also performing other duties, including issuing arms from the state arsenal and making cartridges. Cadet Thomas A. Stevenson wrote:

Great excitement prevails here since the reception of the secession ordinance. . . . We drilled from five in the morning until dusk with slight intermissions. . . . The place about presents a most busy aspect – Arms are being carried from the arsenal armory the entire day to supply the Militia and Volunteers of the County. Five companies equipped for service passed here en route for Washington. It was quite touching to see their wives and children following after. Our entire second class

are employed in making cartridges and tents are being repaired and every warlike preparation is being made.<sup>23</sup>

Preparations for war were being made throughout the Commonwealth. On 20 April, Governor Letcher published a call for volunteers for defense of the state. The Central Fair Grounds, located a mile and a half north of Richmond, was designated as the camp of instruction for the state's new recruits.

Likewise on 20 April, couriers from Richmond arrived at VMI informing Major Gilham that he would be in command of the camp of instruction in Richmond and that the Acting Superintendent was to "immediately send Corps of Cadets to Richmond" as drill instructors.<sup>24</sup> The order from Richmond was not unexpected because the cadets were the best drilled and proficient military organization in the state. Orders were published for the trip to Richmond with the departure the next day, Sunday the twenty-first. Younger and less experienced cadets were to be left behind in Lexington to guard the arsenal. The Acting Superintendent wrote in the orders:

When the muster is held for men who have souls to defend their native soil from violation, insult and subjugation, the heart of every true Virginian responds to the voice as with stern delight he answers, 'Here!' Words are not necessary now to stimulate.

The Corps of Cadets will prove their birth and breeding and exhibit to Virginia the worth of her favorite Institute. The cadet will not fail to manifest the advantage which the military education gives to him over those not less brave than himself. The corps will go forth, the pride of its friends, the hope of the State, and the terror of her foes. May the blessings of the God of Hosts rest upon every one who is battling in this Holy Cause.<sup>25</sup>

The cadets arrived in Richmond on the evening of 22 April. A local Richmond paper described the cadet's arrival:

This finely disciplined corps of youth, deservedly the pride of the state, reached Richmond on Monday night, and were quartered at the Fair Grounds. They came fully equipped for a campaign, and brought with them nine pieces of ordnance, of six, eight, and twelve pound caliber, respectively, including one Armstrong gun.

The battalion numbers one hundred eighty-five, and is under the command of Major Colston, who yesterday (the 23rd) appeared with them on parade in Capitol Square, when they paid their compliments to Governor Letcher. . . . Two companies of recruits were placed under their tuition at the Fair Grounds yesterday.<sup>26</sup>

The cadets were quartered in the Exhibition buildings which surrounded the Fair Grounds, recently named Camp Lee.<sup>27</sup> Camp Lee was originally intended to train only Virginia recruits, but soon recruits from all the Confederate states were pouring into the camp. The cadets took their new duties seriously and by 26 April, a reporter wrote that “the cadets are progressing finely in their instructions to recruits and have vastly improved some of the previously organized companies of volunteers.”<sup>28</sup> Some of the cadets’ eagerness, however, did not endear them to the recruits which they were training. A Virginian recruit, George Bagby, wrote of the shock of recruit life and the cadets:

I was three and thirty years old, a born invalid whose habit had been to rise late, bathe leisurely and eat breakfast after everybody else was done. To get up at dawn to the sound of fife and drum, to wash my face in a hurry in a tin basin, wipe on a wet towel, and go forth with suffocated skin, and a sense of uncleanness to be drilled by a fat little cadet, young enough to be my son . . . that indeed was misery. How I hated that little cadet! He was always so wide-awake, so clean, so interested in the drill; his coat-tails were so short and sharp and his hands looked so big in white gloves. He made me sick.<sup>29</sup>

Some cadets were dispatched from Richmond to train additional troops throughout the state. Lee wrote to Smith that “they are wanted everywhere.”<sup>30</sup> Additionally, cadets were joining the companies and regiments they were drilling, so much so that by early July, the Corps of Cadets had ceased to exist in Richmond with only thirty cadets remaining at Camp Lee.<sup>31</sup> This was not unexpected by either the cadets or the administration; in fact, it had been expected. Cadet Gatewood wrote that before leaving VMI for Richmond, Major Gilham told the cadets:

Young gentlemen you all are too high bred to be food for powder. I don't intend that you shall go and fight against the Yankees at the North. I intend to take you to Richmond. You are a well drilled Corps. I want you to go and let the Gov, the officers of the army see how well you can drill, and then every one of you shall have an office. . . . I'll see that you are (none) brought in the battle field as privates if at all.<sup>32</sup>

Near the end of the recruit training, Confederate officials had also granted commissions to those cadets over twenty-one years of age.<sup>33</sup> This action created the perception in the camp and later in the state that those having any military education would receive an officer's commission.

During late June, Smith again tried to form a cadet battalion. The Governor's Advisory Council, in continuous service since 21 April, was dissolved on 19 June. Through Gilham, Smith submitted a proposition to the corps. Smith started the proposition by saying, "I am anxious to place the Battalion of cadets into the field at as early a day as possible. While students of the University and Colleges are taking the field as private soldiers, I do not wish the cadets to be in the background."<sup>34</sup> The proposition then outlined a battalion in which VMI professors would be in command of the companies made up of cadets. Smith closed by saying, "If I cannot find a place in which I can render better service, I am willing to go into the field in command of the battalion of cadets."<sup>35</sup> The letter was returned to Smith the next day with the Corps response: "Believing that our military education entitles us to a higher and more serviceable position, we beg leave, most respectfully, to decline the above proposition."<sup>36</sup>

Additionally, the cadets wrote to Gilham that "when we deem that the proper time arrives for us to go in ranks we will select from our own body such officers as we think qualified and attach ourselves to what regiment we deem proper and die, if necessary, in defense of our homes."<sup>37</sup> The cadet response was not what Smith had expected, but the

decision was a fortunate one for the Confederacy. The cadets ensured that instead of being grouped into one battalion, a large pool of company and field grade talent would be spread throughout the future Army of Northern Virginia. Smith was soon assigned as a Colonel of the Ninth Virginia Regiment, Heavy Artillery, and ordered to Craney Island in command of the defenses of Norfolk Harbor.

With the closing of Camp Lee in July 1861, the cadets had drilled over twenty thousand recruits.<sup>38</sup> Smith reported to the Board of Visitors:

In this valuable and laborious duty the cadets have been constantly engaged until the present time. . . . As a just tribute to the value of these services, a complementary resolution was unanimously passed the Convention of Va and an allowance of \$20 a month, in addition to substance made to each cadet thus employed.<sup>39</sup>

The \$20 paid to the cadets by the state of Virginia would soon yield a high return for the Confederacy. These recruits trained in Richmond and throughout the state would soon be fighting in the Battle of First Manassas. It can be argued that their performance in that battle would not have been possible without the efforts of the VMI Corps of Cadets.<sup>40</sup>

Back in Lexington, the cadet numbers were also dwindling. Of the forty-seven cadets that were left behind when the bulk of the Corps went to Richmond, seventeen cadets soon left VMI. A detail of ten cadets was sent with arms and ammunition to Harpers Ferry where the new commander, Colonel Thomas Jackson, kept the cadets and used them as drillmasters for his troops. Preston let seven cadets from other states resign. "Native cadets," wrote Preston, "I do not allow to resign under any circumstances, as I look upon the whole corps as now in active service."<sup>41</sup> Preston issued orders to the remaining cadets:

The whole corps is now in active service, and the detail made for this post, is made by the same order, from the same order from the Adjutant General of

Virginia, which put on the march those that have just left us. Those that remain are doing duty to Virginia as real and it may be as efficient as those who are going. It is not the service that any one of us would prefer. But the Soldier who is prepared to do only such duty as pleases him is not to be trusted. The Soldier who would desert a post would fly in battle.<sup>42</sup>

With just thirty cadets guarding the arsenal, local militia companies were ordered to Lexington to augment the cadets. By the end of April, the militia companies were ordered to duty in Northern Virginia, once again creating a shortage of guards for the arsenal. Additional cadets were urgently needed for guard duty but few could be spared from duty in Richmond and other parts of the state. To quickly increase the number of cadets at VMI, the acting superintendent, in late April, ran newspaper advertisements in Richmond and other cities in the state. The ads stated that the course of instruction at VMI would be devoted exclusively to military tactics with no tuition being charged except for actual expenses for the foreseeable future.<sup>43</sup> College students, seeing this as an easy way to quickly get military training for officer commissions, flocked to VMI. By 1 May, 100 college students from around Virginia became new “cadets.”<sup>44</sup> Preston reported to the Board of Visitors that:

The scheme for imparting a certain amount of preparation to young men who were anxious to enter the service of the state was well conceived and worked as well as could have been anticipated. The temporary cadets were drilled in Infantry and Artillery three and four times daily and received in the Section Room instruction in the military art by daily recitations upon Tactics and from lecture by Major Crutchfield, admirably adapted to their positions and present advancement and calculated to be of great benefit to them as soon as they should be called into the field.<sup>45</sup>

The new cadets at VMI for this period of military instruction were grouped as members of the Class of 1864-M.S. (Military Science).<sup>46</sup> Of the 100 cadets who reported to VMI between 21 April and July 1861, only fourteen of the cadets stayed for future



instruction after VMI re-opened in 1862. Cadets began resigning on 13 June to start seeking commissions. Preston continued his report:

This course was briefer than it had been anticipated it would be, and this from two causes. The young men themselves became impatient for active service and the more so as they began to feel themselves competent to discharge the duties of Company officers and the opportunities of obtaining these offices were diminishing by the rapid organization of the Volunteer Companies of the State. Several of them went to the command of Genl Garnett in the North-West and some other to that of LtCol McCausland in the Valley . . . to act as drill masters. The other cause and of itself controlling, was that the officers on duty at the Institute wished upon the privilege of being active participants in the field, in the great struggle for the defense of Virginia against her invaders, and gave notice that they would not continue at the Institute longer than the 4th July, even if to leave it should require them to resign their positions as Professors. Under these circumstances it was a matter of incredible necessity to discontinue the instruction of the school until the Board should provide some other course of instructions.<sup>47</sup>

However, Preston saw that this type of instruction could be extremely valuable in the future and added a paragraph to the end of his report about continuing VMI's "officer's training:"

It is proper for me to express to the Board in this connection, that the correspondence of this office leaves me no room to doubt that there is a very great demand at present for just such instruction as the Institute imparts. Many young men who propose to take the field are anxious of attaining some preliminary preparations and a great many parents of sons too young at present for the service are anxious to place them at a military school where they may be fitted for the emergencies of a future now so uncertain.<sup>48</sup>

From April to July 1861, VMI cadets and faculty had instructed both recruits and future officers for duty in the Virginia and Confederate armies with tremendous success. However, the cadets and faculty had also been swept up by the war fever and a desire to do their part in the struggle and had gained positions in the armies of Virginia and the Confederacy. Since there were no cadets to instruct or faculty to instruct them, VMI ceased operation on 2 July as an academic and military institution. The future of VMI

during the war seemed in doubt. Smith addressed this question when he submitted his annual report to the Board of Visitors in July 1861:

The question now presents itself, what shall be done with the Institute in the disorganized condition in which it is now placed. All the professors are in the field, or are under orders for active service. . . . While these new duties to which they are called actually conflict with the immediate and legitimate duties connected with the professional appointments, they naturally flow from the position which they hold as members of the State military school. . . . It now becomes necessary then to determine whether the Institution shall be continued during the war, and if so – in what way? I have no doubt as to the duty of the Board – and that is to require the Institution to be carried on with all the vigor possible under existing circumstances.<sup>49</sup>

Smith also added a request of his own:

I submit herewith a communication which I have received from the Adj Gen'l by which orders are given me to report for military duty to Gen'l Lee . . . under the commission which I hold in the Virginia Forces. This order is similar to those issued to the other professors and I have to request that I may be allowed a furlough for such time as my services may be required in my new field of labor. This year closes my twenty-second year of continuous labor in the Institution. I have devoted the vigor of an early manhood to the responsible charge to which I have been assigned. . . . I feel then that I may reasonably claim the indulgence which I ask, especially when it is to be devoted to the defense of my native State in its military service. While our Mother Virginia is calling upon all her sons to rally around her standard and to aid in repelling the ruthless foe that now pollutes and desecrates her soil, it is most fit that the Chief Officer of this Institution which has send some many of its eleves [graduates] into the field, should himself set an example of devotion to duty.<sup>50</sup>

The newly appointed Board of Visitors for the 1861-1862 academic year met in Lexington on 15 July. Receiving both Smith's and Preston's reports, discussion immediately began on what the role of VMI would be for the duration for the war. Despite the cadets and faculty performing very capably in instructing recruits and prospective officers, one member of the Board of Visitors believed VMI should perform another mission. Adjutant General Richardson thought the optimal role for VMI was maintaining the academic program in order to produce officers for the Confederate Army.

VMI, in effect, would become the “West Point for the Confederacy.” Besides, Richardson stated, the board had no legal right to close the school. Richardson eventually won over the other members of the board and a tentative date to re-open VMI was set for 1 October. However, it soon became obvious to the Board that if VMI was going to re-open, the school’s Superintendent could not be spared for service in the Confederate Army. The Board sent a letter to Smith on 15 July, informing him of the board’s decision. It stated:

I am directed by the Board of Visitors, VMI, to communicate the following resolution and to request an answer thereto at your earliest convenience.  
“Resolved, as the opinion of the Board that the continued superintendence of the Military Institute by Colonel Smith is essential to the interests, if not the existence of the Institution, and that it is unwilling to give him up to the service of the Confederate States at this moment when the Institute is almost at a point of disorganization.”

“And the board forbearing to exercise its undoubted authority to command his service, contends itself for the present with an appealing to that spirit of self-sacrifice which he has so long displayed.”<sup>51</sup>

Smith, who was in Lexington, received the board’s letter the same day and the projected re-open date of VMI. He sent his response to the board the next day. He wrote:

I have maturely considered the views which have been presented to me by the Board in reference to the duty on my part of remaining at my post here, and aiding the Board by my presence and authority in the re-organization of the institute.

If the re-organization which is proposed can possibly be effected by the 1st of October, I shall consider the wishes of the Board as a command to me to do my best at that time.

It is possible the expectation of the Board may be disappointed in this matter. The condition of the country may prevent the assembling of the cadets; or if these can be had, I may meet with grave difficulties than are anticipated in securing suitable Professors and Officers, and without these it would be better to suspend the School altogether.

If the Board will make the resumption of duties contingent upon these two points, and will give me a furlough until the 1st of October, I will bind myself to respect and obey their order, and I will faithfully carry out the wishes that the Board suppose necessary to effect the re-organization.

With the earnest of my fullest purpose to do all in my power to carry out the wishes of the Board, I hope the Board will gratify me by allowing me the furlough which I have asked, with the understanding that if the re-opening of the School is impossible it may be extended indefinitely.<sup>52</sup>

It is ironic that the one person against the re-opening of VMI was Smith himself. Smith's letters to the Board and Richardson made it clear that he considered his wartime role in the field commanding forces against the invaders of his state, not as headmaster of a military college. Smith had received the important assignment of protecting his hometown of Norfolk, Virginia against any Northern attack. One can understand his desire to remain where he was. Smith wrote to the board that his current post was of extreme importance to the Confederacy:

I will say to you in all frankness that this post (Craney Island) is the most important at this juncture to the Southern Confederacy. . . . I am led to believe (that a) demonstration is expected here, and that the reliance of the Department is not mere upon skillful, drilled artillerists, but upon having officers in charge who understand the theory as well as practice of artillery service. Important changes are going on, the result of heavy rifled ordnance, and an officer must understand the principles of these to do his duty here<sup>53</sup>

Smith also wrote to the board that other factors would make the re-opening of the school difficult. In his 1890 *History of the Virginia Military Institute*, Smith wrote that he "presented to the Board, in emphatic language, the many difficulties that would attend the effort to continue the work of the school pending the war, the restlessness of the cadets, the impossibilities of securing supplies of provisions, clothing, fuel, books, etc., difficulties that would increase as the war progressed."<sup>54</sup> As the war went on, many of Smith's concerns would be born out. Smith was also concerned with what relationship the Institute would have with the Confederacy, specifically with providing officers. Smith understood that VMI would require the support of the Confederate Government in order

to succeed in its desired mission during the war. Smith wrote to Richardson on 23

November:

I am anxious that the Board shall settle the question, as far as they can do it, with regard to the connection of the Institute with the Southern Confederacy. I think that all that is valuable in the art of war may be secured by having an understanding with the Confederate Government that at each annual examination the Secretary of war shall notify the Board of Visitors of the number of officers required for the military service, then send a board of examiners to meet when the Board is in session, that they may examine the graduating classes and report to the President the names of such as are recommended for commissions in the Army, the arm of service for which they are fitted, etc. This would give the Government all the advantage it might require of the School.<sup>55</sup>

Richardson, the main advocate behind VMI's role producing future officers for the Confederacy, forwarded Smith's letter to J. P. Benjamin, Secretary of War for the Confederate States with the following endorsement, "Though it is a mere glance at the subject, the Board of Visitors will be pleased to receive the views of the President and yourself, and to meet them as fully as it may be in their power to do so now and hereafter."<sup>56</sup> No response was received from the Confederate government. Smith wrote to the Governor in December and again brought up the relationship between the school and the Confederate Government:

I will also take this occasion to say that in re-opening the Military Institute, during the penances of war, the great purpose of the school may be much promoted by some arrangement with the Confederate Government by which a board of examiners may be detailed by the government to attend each annual examination, and select from the graduating class such cadets . . . as may be found worthy . . . for the commission of brevet second lieutenants. . . . I ask no excessive privilege from the Military Institute, and suggest that this is one of the ways in which the largest and most efficient military schools of the South may be more effective for the public service.<sup>57</sup>

Again, no official word was forthcoming from the Confederate government. The issue would be re-visited from time to time during the next two years. However, this failure by the Confederate Government to support VMI and other Southern military schools from

the beginning of the war would have a dramatic effect on the eventual roles these schools performed during the war.

Richardson, aware that Smith did not want to return to the Institute, lobbied Governor Letcher and Confederate President Jefferson Davis to support the re-opening of the Institute under Smith's leadership. Both agreed that the re-opening of VMI was more important than Smith's service in the field and Davis released him from active duty to oversee the re-opening the school. Smith was relieved from his Norfolk post in late November and returned to VMI in early December.

The Board of Visitors met again in September. Due to the Battle of Manassas, the Board moved the re-opening of the school to 1 January 1862. The Board further resolved that:

The President of the Board communicate with the Governor of Va that the Board of Visitors have this day resolved to continue operations of the V. M. Institute on the 1st of January, and that he be respectfully requested to ascertain from the President of the Confederate States whether the service of the Professors now in the field can be spared from their duties in the Army without serious detriment to the public service, it being the opinion of the Board that the preservation of the academic organization is important to the efficient operation of the school.<sup>58</sup>

The Confederate government granted permission and the Board set about contacting professors about returning to VMI. With a few exceptions, all the pre-war professors returned.<sup>59</sup> The Board of Visitors also declared that the Class of 1862 was to be graduated on 6 December 1861, meaning that there would be no First (senior) class for the 1862 school year.<sup>60</sup> A final board meeting was held in November to deal with the last minute problems of re-opening the school.

Even before the John Brown raid, VMI had seen an increase in the number of applications received due mainly to state-wide trips the Corps had performed during the

1850s. The raid did intensify the desire of both parents and young men to acquire a military education in order to be prepared for a possible civil war. VMI's reputation as the premier military school in the South had also grown and the Board of Visitors opened VMI to cadets from other states in 1858.

With the start of the war, VMI had no shortage of applicants. Under a newly promoted Major General Smith, VMI re-opened on 1 January 1862 with the arrival of the 153 Rats (freshmen) of the Class of 1865.<sup>61</sup> By comparison, the prewar classes of 1863 contained 103 members and the Class of 1864, 143 members. Other wartime classes were similar or greater in size, the Class of 1866 boasting 147 and the Class of 1867 having an amazing 295 cadets. Only late in 1864 did the numbers start dropping with the Class of 1868 reporting with 111 cadets.<sup>62</sup> War time enrollment was helped by the fact that most of Virginia's colleges closed their doors due to lack of students, leaving VMI as one of the only colleges open in the state.<sup>63</sup> However, the primary reason for the number of applicants was the fact that VMI offered an education in military skills. Parents believed that VMI would provide training and experience that would prove extremely useful when their sons eventually went into military service.<sup>64</sup> Older students from other colleges transferred to VMI specifically to gain military knowledge and to prepare themselves for service in the military. Others cadets were former soldiers, both officers and enlisted, who returned to VMI to finish their education or start their education while recuperating from wounds received on the battlefield. In all, ninety-five cadets are known to have been in active military service before attending VMI.<sup>65</sup>

The large influx of cadets meant that Smith had to recruit more instructors. With most competent professors serving in the military, it was difficult to obtain qualified

teachers. Many of the instructors that Smith employed taught only briefly at VMI and most were recuperating from wounds or on parole awaiting exchange before they could return to active duty.<sup>66</sup> Cadet John B. Wise, a member of the Class of 1866, wrote after the war:

The institute was an asylum for its wounded alumni, and many such banished from home by invasion or distance, occupied the period of convalescence in teaching. One day Cutshaw, one of Lee's artillerists, shot all to pieces at the front and sent home to die, would teach us mathematics until he could wear his wooden leg back to his battery; and another day Preston (J. T. L. Preston's son), with his empty sleeve, would show us that none of his Latin was lost with his arm. At another time "Tige" Hardin, pale and broken, would come to teach until he could fight again or Col. Marshall McDonald . . . would hobble in to point with a crutch at problems on the blackboard until strong enough once more to point with sword toward the 'looming bastions fringed with fire.'<sup>67</sup>

The Confederate Government did have a connection with the new class. Among the 153 new cadets attending VMI on 1 January, fifty-three of them were sent to VMI by the Confederate government holding the commission of "Cadet."<sup>68</sup> Jefferson Davis first proposed a cadet program in a report to Congress in April 1861. He wrote:

To secure a thorough military education, it is deemed essential that officers should enter upon the study of their profession at an early period of life, and have elementary instruction in a military school. Until such school shall be established, it is recommended that cadets be appointed and attached to companies until they shall have attained the age, and have acquired the knowledge, to fit them for the duties of lieutenants.<sup>69</sup>

Based on Davis' recommendation, the Confederate Congress amended the original Army Act creating a cadet program:

Section 8: That until a military school shall be established for the elementary instruction of officers for the Army, the President shall be authorized to appoint cadets from the several States in number proportionate to their representation in the House of Representatives, and ten, in addition, to be selected by him at large from the Confederate States, who shall be attached to companies in service in any branch of the Army as supernumerary officers, with the rank of "Cadet," who shall receive the monthly pay of \$40.00, and be competent for promotion at such



time, and under such regulations, as may be prescribed by the President, or hereafter established by law.<sup>70</sup>

An unknown number of these cadets attended the major Southern military colleges throughout the war and with the exception of these cadets, the Confederate cadet program was ineffective. A cadet attached to a company in the field, while learning the art of war close up and first hand, had a very good chance of getting killed. Additionally, the cadets were sometimes assigned to duties for which they were not intended. This practice led General Braxton Bragg to issue the following order in January 1863:

Cadets appointed to regiments are, by law, assigned there as schools of instructions, and will not be removed by commanders for any purpose whatever; especially if the assignment for them to duty on the staff of general officers prohibited. They are boys and students, to be taught, not teachers of men, their superiors.<sup>71</sup>

The Confederate government increased dissatisfaction among the cadets by insisting in April 1863, that cadets be twenty-one years of age before being eligible for lieutenant examination boards. One cadet, not yet twenty-one, had by this time been involved in sixteen battles.<sup>72</sup> Further, the criteria set by the Confederate War Department for the examination boards tested the cadet on reading, writing, spelling, mathematics, “including fractions, the extraction of square roots, and the use of logarithms,” algebra, geometry, plane trigonometry, mensuration, surveying, mechanics and tactics.<sup>73</sup> For a cadet trying to study during campaigns and battles, this was next to impossible.

Ironically, while the Confederate Government never established a national military academy, they did establish a national naval academy. The Confederate States of America Naval Academy opened in 1863 onboard the school ship CSS *Patrick Henry* on the James River in Richmond, Virginia and remained opened throughout the remainder of the war. A total of 180 midshipmen were trained. The midshipmen’s final duty was as an

escort for the departure of the Confederate government's gold during the fall of Richmond.<sup>74</sup>

It seems odd that the Confederate government would devote time and money to establishing a naval academy while neglecting the establishment of a national military academy, a seemingly more pressing requirement. In truth, the Confederate government already had their national military academies; the four major Southern state military colleges (VMI, The Citadel, Georgia Military Institute and University of Alabama) and numerous other smaller state military colleges were providing the majority of company and field grade officers to the Confederate Army. A national military academy simply was not needed by the Confederate government during the war.

Throughout the war, VMI's problem was in not attracting cadets but keeping them. Historian Richard McMurry's study on the Corps of Cadets during the war concluded that for the Classes of 1863 through 1868, there were 969 matriculants with only ninety-four graduates, an amazing disparity. For many cadets, receiving an education at a military college could not compete with winning honor and commendations on a battlefield. Most cadets waited until they were of enlistment age (eighteen at the beginning of the war, later changed to seventeen) and with or without their parents permission would either resign or desert. A cadet in 1862 wrote that "the cadets are resigning very fast . . . all think they ought to be in the army."<sup>75</sup> Cadet

Jacquelin B. Stanard wrote to his sister in 1864:

I do not intend to remain here after this month. . . . If I can't get some place I am stout and hardy enough to rough it as a private. Do you not candidly think I ought to be in the Army? *I am over 18*. I think I have been very obedient in remaining here as long as I have, and only done so because I hated to go contrary to the wish

of a fond and devoted Mother. I think Mother might very willingly give her consent now, that the prospect of the war ending soon is very great.<sup>76</sup>

Cadets, believing or knowing their parents would not grant permission to leave VMI and not wanting to desert, instead attempted to get expelled for either discipline or academic problems. Smith wrote in his history of VMI:

All cadets who were deficient in their studies, or neglectful of duty, were promptly discharged, and, if eighteen years of age, were ordered to report for duty in the Army; and under this rule, some seventy cadets were discharged, by reason of deficiency at one of the regular examinations. It was indeed the wish and purpose of the cadets to go into the Army, and their neglect in studies was due, in a great measure to this cause.<sup>77</sup>

Smith did try to appeal to the cadets to remain at VMI. One cadet wrote that, “As General Smith says, be soldiers in the next army, after the present one has been killed off.”<sup>78</sup>

However, as the war continued, Smith could not stem the tide. Cadet John B. Wise wrote:

As the war wore on, the stirring events following each other so rapidly and so near at hand bred a restlessness and discontent in every high-strung boy among us. Each battle seemed to infuse fresh impatience in the cadets, who would assemble at the sally-port for discussion; the mails were crowded with letters begging parents and guardians for permission to resign and go to the war. Good boys became bad ones to secure dismissal and as the result of these conspiracies regular hegriras would occur.<sup>79</sup>

The number of cadets fluctuated literally every day, with old cadets leaving VMI and new cadets arriving. During a seven month period, from January to July 1862, only 143 out of 268 cadets remained.<sup>80</sup>

The Confederate government soon complicated VMI's cadet problems by passing the Conscription Act in April 1862. The act, passed by the Confederate Congress by more than a two to one vote, declared every able-bodied white man between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five to be subject to the military service of the Confederate States for the duration of the war and nullified previous contracts made with volunteers.<sup>81</sup> The act

divided the population of the Confederacy into two economic groups, the fighters and producers, with the producers being excused from the Conscription Act. Included in the producer group were presidents and professors in colleges and academies and teachers having twenty or more pupils.<sup>82</sup> Unbelievably, the Confederate Congress did not designate state military colleges or cadets attending them as “producers” fearing that the various schools would become havens for draft dodgers.<sup>83</sup> For the Confederate Congress to believe that VMI and other Southern military colleges, with the majority of their graduates in Confederate service, would harbor draft dodgers amounted to a slap in the face. The Act created a public perception throughout the war that any cadets over 18 years of age should be in military service, not in school. The failure to exempt cadets shows how uncoordinated the Confederate government was concerning the various state military schools. The state military colleges were providing the lifeblood of the Confederate Army by educating soon-to-be officers, yet the Confederate government would not exempt cadets eighteen years old from finishing their military education. While some draft dodgers probably attended VMI and the other state military schools, of the 969 cadets that attended VMI at some point during the Civil War, 962 served in the Confederate Army during the war either as officers, enlisted or as cadets.<sup>84</sup>

Governors from South Carolina, Alabama and Georgia protested the possible conscription of their cadets. Governor Brown of Georgia became involved in a serious controversy with the President over the execution of the Conscript Act and designated the cadets as state employees, making them ineligible for the draft.<sup>85</sup>

VMI’s Board of Visitors wrote to the Confederate Congress about the Conscription Act:

The board of Visitors of the Virginia Military Institute respectfully request that this Institution which has for its model the Military Academy of the late United States, affords a complete course of military and scientific education to not less than 250 youths has already supplied a considerable number of valuable officers for the service of the Confederate States, and by its Board of Visitors and the Corps of Professors and instructors is now zealously and effectively operating with a view to continue that supply.

No cadets are received who have attained the age of 18 years, but there are none who will not have come to that age before the course is finished. Some who are now in the last year of the course are however within the operation of the conscript law and are consequently liable to be taken off before graduating. The Government of this Institution having been invested by law in the Board of Visitors, we respectfully submit for the consideration of your honorable body the expediency of so modifying the act of Congress referred to, as to avoid what much other wise have an almost insurmountable impediment to the continued usefulness and success of this, the most important military school within the Southern Confederacy.

It is proper to state that the Board of Visitors are careful to guard as far as possible against the admission of any, whose aim is only to escape from military service in the field.<sup>86</sup>

Virginia's Governor Letcher also protested the act and attempted to get President Davis to exempt the VMI cadets, but Davis replied that it was not in his power to grant exemptions not specifically authorized by Congress. Davis did however, suggest that Letcher allow a cadet to be drafted and then test the law by applying for a writ of habeas corpus for the draftee. Letcher instead ordered Smith not to surrender any cadet for conscription until the constitutionality of the Conscription Act was decided.<sup>87</sup> Eventually, Richardson wrote to Smith that Davis, "advised me to state the matter in all its bearings to the Sec'y of War and said that as those cadets above 18 would probably not be required in service the Sec'y could furlough such as may be enrolled as conscripts for an indefinite time, or until Congress could act upon it."<sup>88</sup> A truce brokered by the Confederate Government and the state of Virginia over conscription would last a short time. Lack of manpower would force the Confederate government to threaten conscription of the entire Corps in 1864, setting up further confrontation between the two governments.

Early in the war, General Robert E. Lee was asked if VMI should continue operations during the conflict. He replied that, “We never wanted the advantages of military instruction more than now and the Virginia Military Institute is the best and purest fountain from which we can be supplied.”<sup>89</sup> The cadets and faculty of VMI had performed invaluable services to the state of Virginia and the Confederate Army in the early stages of the war. Despite proficiency in training recruits, the state decided that VMI could best serve the Confederacy by remaining an academic institution educating future officer for service. Unfortunately, the Confederate government failed to properly support VMI from the beginning and without their support, VMI’s role in the war would very different than what the state had intended.

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<sup>1</sup>McMurry, 35.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Gatewood letter to Parents, 8 March 1861, Andrew C. L. Gatewood Papers, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.

<sup>3</sup>However, Smith’s counterpart at Washington College, Dr. William Junkin, was a staunch pro-Union supporter and left Washington College and Virginia when the state succeeded. One of Junkin’s sons stayed behind and raised a company that fought for the Confederacy and “Stonewall” Jackson’s first wife was Junkin’s daughter.

<sup>4</sup>McMurry, 35. In the 1860 Presidential Election, Constitutional Union Party candidate John Bell received the most ballots cast in Rockbridge County. Second was another conservative, Democratic Party candidate Stephen A. Douglas. Campaigning on “Southern rights,” John C. Breckinridge placed third in the county with only 365 votes while the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln, received one vote. Over 83 percent of the voters in Rockbridge County cast their ballots for candidates that favored moderation.

<sup>5</sup>Robert J. Driver, *Lexington and Rockbridge County in the Civil War* (Lynchburg: Howard, 1989), 2

<sup>6</sup>Couper, II, 86.

<sup>7</sup>Cadets from the Citadel participated in the bombardment of Fort Sumter.

<sup>8</sup>Robertson, 210.

- <sup>9</sup>OR, Ser. 3, 1:67-78.
- <sup>10</sup>Smith III, "Old Spex of VMI," 148.
- <sup>11</sup>Smith to Governor John Letcher, April 16, 1861, Superintendent's Records: Outgoing Correspondence, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.
- <sup>12</sup>Board of Visitors Minutes, 1853-1864, VMI Archives, 309.
- <sup>13</sup>Smith III, "Old Spex of VMI," 148.
- <sup>14</sup>Ibid., 149.
- <sup>15</sup>The Board would later be expanded to five members.
- <sup>16</sup>Smith III, "Old Spex of VMI," 150.
- <sup>17</sup>Ibid., 151.
- <sup>18</sup>The Provisional Army was mustered into Confederate service. The Volunteers served the same purpose as today's National Guard and the Militia was composed of everyone either too young or old to serve. Colonel Keith Gibson, Head, VMI Museum, interviewed by Michael Wallace, 8 October 2005.
- <sup>19</sup>Robertson 211
- <sup>20</sup>Ibid., 212.
- <sup>21</sup>Andrew Gatewood to Sister, 18 April 1861, Andrew C. L. Gatewood Papers, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.
- <sup>22</sup>Special Orders Book, 1861, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia, 238.
- <sup>23</sup>Thomas A. Stevenson letter to "My Dear Sister" 19 April 1861, Thomas A. Stevenson Papers, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.
- <sup>24</sup>Couper, II, 95.
- <sup>25</sup>Order Book, Order No. 63, 21 April 1861, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.
- <sup>26</sup>*Richmond Daily Examiner*, 24 April 1861. Jackson who was actually in command disliked ceremonies and was not present when the cadets were reviewed by the Governor.
- <sup>27</sup>The camp was named not for Robert E. Lee but for General Henry (Light Horse Harry) Lee.
- <sup>28</sup>*Richmond Daily Examiner*, 27 April 1861.

- <sup>29</sup>Couper, II, 101.
- <sup>30</sup>Ibid., 106.
- <sup>31</sup>Conrad, 40.
- <sup>32</sup>Gatewood papers, VMI Archives.
- <sup>33</sup>Couper, II, 119.
- <sup>34</sup>Ibid., 120.
- <sup>35</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup>Smith reported that 12-15, 000 troops had been trained by the VMI Corps of Cadets in Richmond. With the services of other cadets training recruits throughout the state the number was closer to 20,000, a remarkable feat for less than 200 cadets.
- <sup>39</sup>Board of Visitors Minutes, 1853-1864, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia, 309.
- <sup>40</sup>In a letter to the Superintendent of VMI, Dr. Douglas S. Freeman wrote, "The work of these cadets in training the men who fought at Manassas and the opening battles of 1862 has never been appraised as highly as history justifies. Especially at Harpers Ferry while Jackson was in command of the post, VMI cadets rendered incalculable service. Jackson's famous brigade which constituted the "Stonewall" on Henry Hill, owed almost as much to its cadet drillmaster as to the discipline of 'Old Jack' himself." Letter to the Superintendent, 10 November 1938, VMI Archives.
- <sup>41</sup>Preston Letter to Colonel Smith, 24 April 1861, Superintendent Correspondence, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.
- <sup>42</sup>Board of Visitors Minutes, 1853-1864, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia, 315.
- <sup>43</sup>Couper, Vol II, 115.
- <sup>44</sup>Most of the college students were from the University of Virginia.
- <sup>45</sup>Board of Visitors Minutes, 1853-1864, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia, 316.
- <sup>46</sup>Since most of the cadets did not stay more than a couple of months a better designation would have been "Class of 1861 – M.S."
- <sup>47</sup>Board of Visitors Minutes, 1853-1864, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia, 316.



<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 311.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 314.

<sup>51</sup>Smith, III, "Old Spex of VMI," 159.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 160.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 161.

<sup>54</sup>Smith, 182.

<sup>55</sup>Wise, 173.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Smith, III, "Old Spex of VMI," 161.

<sup>58</sup>Board of Visitors Minutes, 1853-1864, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia, 318.

<sup>59</sup>BGen Thomas J. Jackson asked for and was granted a furlough for the duration of the war. He was one of the few professors granted one.

<sup>60</sup>This did not sit well with many in the Class of 1862 as many had wanted to return to VMI but now believed they were debarred from doing so. Couper, II, 136.

<sup>61</sup>Smith was promoted to Brevet Major General by Governor Letcher on December 18, 1861. Most attribute Smith's promotion to the fact that one of Smith's faculty members, Thomas J. Jackson, had been promoted to Major General in the Confederate Army and it would be improper for the Superintendent to be of lesser rank. Another possibility is that Letcher promoted Smith to compensate for Smith being recalled from active duty. During the Civil War, the state considered VMI a military installation equivalent of such a rank. Colonel Keith Gibson, Head, VMI Museum, interviewed by Michael Wallace, 8 October 2005.

<sup>62</sup>McMurry, 44.

<sup>63</sup>Both the University of Virginia and Washington College closed during the war. One college that remained open was Roanoke College. Colonel Keith Gibson, Head, VMI Museum, interviewed by Michael Wallace, 8 October 2005.

<sup>64</sup>McMurry, 44.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>67</sup>John S. Wise, “The West Point of the Confederacy,” *The Century Magazine*, 1889, 463.

<sup>68</sup>There are two different numbers (50 and 53) given of Confederate Cadets in various histories of VMI.

<sup>69</sup>*OR*, Armies, Series IV, Vol. 1, p.267.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>71</sup>*OR*, Armies, Series IV, Vol. 47, 496.

<sup>72</sup>Conrad, 155.

<sup>73</sup>*OR*, Armies, Series IV, Vol. 53, 1157.

<sup>74</sup>James Lee Conrad has written a history of the Confederate States Naval Academy entitled *Rebel Reefers*.

<sup>75</sup>John B. Snodgrass to his sister on 29 March 1862, John B. Snodgrass Papers, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.

<sup>76</sup>Beverly Stanard, *Letters of a New Market Cadet* (New York: Evergreen, 1961), 50.

<sup>77</sup>Smith, 183.

<sup>78</sup>John B. Snodgrass to his sister on 29 March 1862, John B. Snodgrass Papers, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.

<sup>79</sup>John S. Wise, “The West Point of the Confederacy,” *The Century Magazine*, 1889, 463.

<sup>80</sup>Conrad, 50.

<sup>81</sup>Albert Burton Moore, *Conscription and Conflict in the Confederacy* (Hillary: New York, 1963), 13.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>83</sup>VMI actually marketed itself as a way to avoid the Conscription Act. The following appeared in the *Southern Illustrated News* on November 8, 1862: “WANTED – A few more young men of good moral character, to fill up the Corps of Cadets, at the VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE. Applicant must be between the ages of eighteen and twenty five years of age. This is a good chance for young men who wish to avoid the Conscription Act.” Smith, III, “Old Spex of VMI,” 176.

<sup>84</sup>McMurry, 45.

<sup>85</sup>Wise, 175.

<sup>86</sup>Couper, II, 145.

<sup>87</sup>Conrad, 52.

<sup>88</sup>Couper, II, 141.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 139.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE MIDDLE WAR YEARS, 1862-1863

War threatened the Shenandoah Valley only three months after the re-opening of the Virginia Military Institute. As part of General George McClellan's advance up the Virginia peninsula towards Richmond in early spring 1862, three Union forces were concentrated within striking distance of the Shenandoah Valley. These were the armies of General Irwin McDowell outside Washington, D.C.; General Nathaniel Banks in the northern part of the Shenandoah Valley; and General John Fremont to the west of Banks in what is now West Virginia. VMI professor and Confederate commander of troops in the Valley, General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, was ordered by General Robert E. Lee, serving as military advisor to President Jefferson Davis, to keep as many Union troops engaged in the Shenandoah Valley to prevent them from working in combination with McClellan's forces pressing up the Peninsula.

Appraising the situation in the Shenandoah Valley, Jackson realized that he could not allow Banks and Fremont to join against him, and developed a plan to defeat each Union army in turn. To do this, Jackson needed to combine his 6,000 man force with that of General Richard Ewell's army stationed to the east of the Blue Ridge and withdrew from the lower (southern) Shenandoah Valley in April 1862 (figure 1).<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1. Shenandoah Valley during Civil War

Jackson's apparent withdrawal from the valley sent a wave of panic through citizens living in the lower Shenandoah Valley. Rumors circulated that Union armies were advancing from the north and the west. General Banks moved his army up the valley and reached Harrisonburg, Virginia on 22 April, a distance of sixty miles from Lexington. Even before this, Major General Smith, the Superintendent of VMI, wrote to General William Richardson, the Adjutant General of Virginia, concerning the preservation and defense of State property, primarily the Arsenal, in Lexington.<sup>2</sup> A telegram response from Richardson told Smith to "use his own discretion in removing Institute property."<sup>3</sup> Further guidance was received the next day authorizing Smith to move state property to Richmond by way of Lynchburg, if he deemed it necessary.<sup>4</sup>

Smith also put VMI on a war footing on 22 April. In General Order No. 44, Smith wrote to the Corps:

The near approach of the enemy to this institution makes it proper that special attention should be given to the military instruction of the institution during the present and the next week. To this end the recitations on Latin, French, Geography and Natural Philosophy will be suspended for this time and such drills and recitations on military sciences will be carried on as circumstances may allow. Practical duties of picket guards will be specially attended to. Should the presence of the enemy in the Valley endanger the safety of the institution, the Superintendent will deem it his highest duty to tender every available member of it to aid in defending the home of each cadet.<sup>5</sup>

Smith also informed the Corps that he had tendered their services to Jackson for the upcoming campaign. The Corps was ecstatic at the news and all resignations and disorders ceased.<sup>6</sup> A cadet wrote on 29 April:

Last Sunday, the news came that the Yankees were about entering Staunton. Academic duties were suspended and our time was devoted to three drills a day – preparing to meet the invader, should he attempt to drive us away from VMI. General Smith told us he would lead us out to meet them if they came a thousand strong.<sup>7</sup>

The situation appeared bad for Lexington and the lower valley with new Union movements. General Banks continued towards Staunton from Harrisonburg, General Milroy was currently at McDowell and General Fremont was moving up the South Branch Valley. On 29 April, Jackson, with Ewell's forces, moved up to Port Republic to confuse Union forces and to keep General McDowell from reinforcing McClellan's army outside of Yorktown, Virginia. Jackson then crossed the Blue Ridge Mountains and marched towards Meechum's River and finally back to Staunton, arriving on 4-5 May. Jackson planned on moving westward to strike Fremont's advanced guard and then turning north to face Banks, preventing the two Union Armies from combining and enabling him to defeat each in turn.

On 30 April, Smith received Jackson's request for the use of the Corps of Cadets in the upcoming campaigns. Jackson asked Smith to march the cadets to Staunton, if Smith felt he had the authority to do so. The cadets, Jackson wrote, would be gone only three days and he trusted, "that an ever-kind Providence will afterwards permit the Institute uninterruptedly to press forward in its great mission."<sup>8</sup> Further, Jackson wrote that he understood the concerns of the parents of sending their sons into battle and offered to assign the whole Corps to baggage duty in order to free up soldiers for the upcoming battle. But Jackson did not anticipate that many cadets would opt for guarding baggage. He wrote:

The duty I know would not be congenial to the feeling of our brave corps, which I am well satisfied would desire the advance; but the patriot, and I regard each one of them as such, is willing to take any position where he can best serve his country.<sup>9</sup>

Smith immediately sent a positive reply back to Jackson that night, and the next morning Smith issued General Order No. 46 to the Corps:

The Corps of Cadets under command of Major S. Ship will be in marching condition as soon as practicable, and proceed forthwith to Staunton. I want no cadet to accompany the command except those who feel that they go with the consent of their parents, either presumed or actual. I have no time to consult all, but have to presume upon the patriotic impulse of parents whose wishes would be to defend the home now so seriously threatened. Let us go into this service, which will be but for a few days with the ardor and devotion of true sons of the South, resolved to maintain the independence of our beloved country.<sup>10</sup>

Smith, for the third time in as many years, had volunteered the Corps of Cadets for military service without obtaining permission from the Board of Visitors, the Adjutant General, the Governor or the cadets' parents. At the beginning of the war, Richardson had given informal guidance to Smith that the Corps of Cadets were only to be employed as a military unit if and when VMI, the Arsenal or State property in the *immediate vicinity* of Lexington, was threatened by enemy forces. However, Smith reasoned that the Corps of Cadets should be employed wherever an enemy threat occurred in order to stop it as far away as possible from Lexington. He, in effect, chose to interpret Richardson's guidance of "immediate vicinity" to be anywhere in the lower Shenandoah Valley. Besides, no one would possibly question Smith on the best way to employ the cadets as a military unit since Smith, by this time, had served as a military advisor to three governors and had been instrumental in organizing Virginia's armed forces. Additionally, Smith argued that using the cadets as a military unit all over the state was established precedent since the corps had been called out for military service twice before by the Governor.

Smith stated as much to the Board of Visitors in his annual report of July 1862. He wrote:

Acting under the discretion extended to me by the Governor and influenced by the precedent of the orders of the Governor on two previous occasions by which the cadets were sent into the field, I immediately proceeded to Staunton with four companies of cadets, under the command of Major Ship, numbering in all some 200 – leaving behind as a guard to the institution all who were disable and whose parents objected to such temporary service.<sup>11</sup>



What Smith neglected to add to his report to the Board of Visitors was that he had volunteered and had heavily lobbied the Governor to use the Corps of Cadets in the two previous occasions. Additionally, using cadets as a guard at an execution or to train recruits was vastly different from sending them into combat. Finally, Smith had ignored the wishes of parents by allowing the cadets to decide themselves whether or not their parents would approve of them going into combat.

Smith had a burning desire to be an active participant in the war. A secessionist, Smith was extremely unhappy about losing his command in Norfolk in order to re-open VMI. However, volunteering the services of the Corps of Cadets as a military unit would allow his direct participation in the war. Smith forgot that it was the Board of Visitors, not Smith, which had operational control of the Corps of Cadets. The Board of Visitors would soon remind him of that fact.

Leaving eleven cadets to guard the arsenal, 200 cadets departed Lexington on 1 May towards Staunton. A cadet wrote, “The Corps of Cadets leave the Institute this morning to go to Staunton to reinforce General Jackson. All of us are in fine spirits – anxious to get a shot at the enemy.”<sup>12</sup> Smith rode ahead in order to meet with Jackson, but because of heavy rains, Jackson was delayed. He instead telegraphed Smith that he was grateful for the co-operation and ordered the Confederate Quartermasters, Commissaries and Ordnance Officers to furnish all necessary supplies to the VMI Corps of Cadets.<sup>13</sup>

The state leadership in Richmond noticed the movement of the Corps. Immediately after being informed by Smith on 1 May of the corps movement to join Jackson, Richardson called a meeting of the Board of Visitors in Richmond to debate

Smith's actions. Richardson, a proponent for keeping VMI open as a military college, was disturbed that Smith would volunteer the use of the cadets, interrupting the cadets' studies and breaking the trust of parents that had sent their sons to the school, not to serve in the military, but for an education. Later that afternoon, Richardson sent both a letter and telegram to Smith stating:

The members present today were unanimous in their disapprobation of the cadets being in any way subjected to the risk of battle unless in the immediate defense of the Institution *at Lexington*, and if we can get a board a resolution will be passed positively forbidding any portion of the corps being sent to join General Jackson. There is no authority for it and the board thinks it would be a breach of good faith on the part of the Institution towards parents and guardians. . . . Will the "elect" at and about Lexington defend the Institute?<sup>14</sup>

The rapid response and the contents of Richardson's letter shocked and humiliated Smith. He was now caught in an embarrassing quandary. Having moved the Corps to Staunton to help Jackson, he was now going to be ordered to return the Corps to Lexington.

On 3 May, Richardson sent another telegram that added to Smith's predicament. Richardson informed Smith that only four board members attended the meeting and that three of the four had declined to give "any instructions in regard to your movement with the corps of cadets."<sup>15</sup> Smith decided to take the inaction of the board as disapproval of his actions and responded to Richardson that: "I shall regard the resolution of the board as instructions to me against co-operation with Gen. J. unless otherwise instructed tomorrow."<sup>16</sup> Richardson, unable to get any useful guidance from the board took the matter to Governor Letcher. Letcher grudgingly approved of Smith's action and responded to Richardson that, "I do not see now how the cadets can be sent back. I think it best to let them go on. The mischief is done and we shall have to let it alone."<sup>17</sup>

Smith, his ego bruised by the reaction of the Board of Visitors, the Adjutant General and the Governor, now attempted to gain support for his decision. Finally able to communicate again with Jackson, Smith wrote to him on 6 May, explaining that as the Commandant of the Public Guard, he had used his authority to order the cadets into military service to protect VMI. However, upon reaching Staunton, the adjutant general informed Smith that he had “misunderstood” his presumed authority and the Board of Visitors objected to the cooperation of the Corps of Cadets with military movements in the field. Smith closed his letter with a request from Jackson:

Finding myself thus unexpectedly and painfully embarrassed, by the action of the Board, and in the opinion of the Governor, I would esteem it a favor if you would inform me in what way, and to what extent, I may take the responsibility of acting in opposition to the express wishes and orders of my immediate superiors.<sup>18</sup>

Jackson immediately wrote back to his former superior that if Smith wanted to return to VMI in light of the Board of Visitors actions he would understand, but in his opinion the cadet’s participation was of “great importance.”<sup>19</sup> Jackson wrote:

In reply I would state, that should you, notwithstanding the action of the Board of Visitors and of the Governor, feel at liberty to continue your cooperation, the corps of cadets will form a part of the reserve, and that its duties will perhaps be of an unusually active character, and may continue for five or seven days. The safety of this section of the Valley, in my opinion, renders your continued cooperation of great importance...<sup>20</sup>

Feeling satisfied and vindicated by Jackson’s response, Smith wrote back to Jackson:

The unqualified expression of your opinion that the continued cooperation of the corps of cadets is of great importance to the safety of this section of the Valley, removes all doubt from my mind as to my duty to give you that cooperation with the limitation of excluding all cadets under eighteen years of age, who have not the consent of their parents to participate in this temporary service.<sup>21</sup>

The crisis now passed, Jackson, donned a new uniform and reviewed the Corps of Cadets on the grounds of the Deaf and Dumb Asylum in Staunton the afternoon of the 6

May. The Corps was assigned to march with the Stonewall Brigade and on 7 May, the cadets marched thirty-four miles with Jackson's forces in twenty-two hours. A battle between Confederate forces under Jackson and General Johnson and Union forces was fought between 7 to 9 May on the heights above McDowell, Virginia. Defeated by a stronger Confederate force, Union forces withdrew down the Shenandoah Valley. Not used in the battle, the cadets nonetheless saw the horrible aftermath of combat and were tasked by Jackson to bury the dead in an effort to harden them.<sup>22</sup> Jackson's pursuit of Union forces continued for two days. Having felt that he had neutralized Fremont's forces, Jackson returned his forces to Lebanon Springs on the 15 May and remained there until the 17 May. The cadets were worn out, but they had kept up with the veterans of Jackson's army. Cadet Colonna wrote later that, "I was getting a little tired of carrying that musket and other toggery."<sup>23</sup> Another cadet wrote, "The Corps of Cadets were nearly all broken down, all were lame with sore feet."<sup>24</sup> From Lebanon Springs, the cadets returned to Staunton while Jackson took his forces north, down the Shenandoah Valley.

While in Staunton, the Corps rested and refitted, being issued "soldiers shoes and socks" to replace the shoes that had been worn out during the recent marching.<sup>25</sup> The cadets returned to Lexington on 19 May, having been away for nineteen days. The cadets were proud of their service but disappointed they had not participated in combat. A cadet wrote to his sister a month after returning to VMI: "the New York Herald says General Jackson has been reinforced by 2000 well drilled cadets. They are slightly mistaken in their numbers – we were not 200 strong."<sup>26</sup>

Smith was also proud of his cadets but was still embarrassed over the Board of Visitors' rebuke. To further justify his actions, Smith wrote in his annual report to the Board of Visitors in July the positive aspects of the cadet's time with Jackson:

It showed them that war was not a pastime, but was an irksome and laborious duty; and most of the restlessness among them . . . has been quieted. Besides, this military expedition has, in a measure vindicated the manhood of those, many of who, although below the legal age for military service, were restless under the reputation of a peace establishment.<sup>27</sup>

Smith had been successful in taking the cadets on a military expedition, gaining the cadets valuable experience on military operations without any combat losses.<sup>28</sup> The episode had also been a valuable lesson for Smith and his ability to use of the Corps of Cadets as a military unit outside of the immediate area of Lexington, Virginia. For the remainder of the war, Smith would always consult and request approval from the Board of Visitors and Richardson before volunteering the cadets for military service. Over a year later, Richardson wrote Smith of "your stampede to join Gen. Jackson, altho [sic] now that it is passed and that without loss of life or limb, I admit was a lucky tho [sic] unauthorized 'coup'."<sup>29</sup>

Because of the already short academic year, the suspension of academic duties in April and the Corps participation with Jackson in May, the Board of Visitors canceled the yearly summer encampment so that the cadets could make up class work. When the 1862-1863 academic school term started on 1 September 1862, the war was far removed from Lexington and VMI was able to hold classes without having to engage in military service; it was the only term during the war that VMI was able to do so.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout the war, VMI, like the rest of the South, faced severe shortages in food, clothing and most importantly for VMI, textbooks and academic supplies.

Textbooks especially were in short supply and cadets were highly encouraged to turn in books to the Quartermaster so they could be re-issued. A cadet, whose brother sent him some text books, wrote to his parents that he wished the brother, “had sent a dozen coppies [sic] of French Grammar as. . . . I could sell every copy [sic] for two \$ apiece.”<sup>31</sup> Glass was also in short supply and Smith required cadets to ensure that fastenings were attached to the windows so that they would not slam shut in the wind breaking the panes. Fabric for cadet uniforms, bought in the north before the war, was extremely hard to come by. Cloth attained from Richmond during the early part of the war was of such poor quality that it was discontinued and eventually every cadet was required to provide his own cloth for uniforms.<sup>32</sup> Soon, the cadet uniforms were anything but uniform, differing in color, length and texture. Smith, in late 1862, requested cloth from General Robert E. Lee, then in camp at Winchester. Lee replied to Smith: “upon the reception of your formal letter, Maj. Bell, the Q’r M’r at Staunton was directed to deliver to you a certain amount of cloth, if in his possession.”<sup>33</sup> The Confederate Government, however, rarely supported any of the southern military colleges with clothes or shoes and when the government did it was to replace stocks used or worn out while the cadets were in active Confederate service. Shoes, especially, were also in short supply and the situation was further aggravated by the constant marching of the cadets during military service. Cadet Langhorne wrote to his parents, “General Smith says he cannot and will not furnish us shoes, and I am nearly barefooted.”<sup>34</sup>

The quality and quantity of food was a constant source of complaints by the cadets (as it still is today). At the beginning of the war, the Board of Visitors granted Smith sweeping powers to deal with all questions of discipline and to obtain supplies.<sup>35</sup>

Smith was able to purchase 300 head of cattle, ten hogsheads and fifty barrels each of sugar and molasses early in the war. Smith stated after the war that, “with these large supplies, judiciously used, we were able to give great comfort to the cadets.”<sup>36</sup> The cadets saw it differently. Cadet Edmund Berkeley wrote:

We have very poor fare here. Today for breakfast we had only two pieces of bread and about half a gill of milk with what we call growly – which is made of mutton, beef, beef feet or anything else they can make. For dinner we have beef or cabbage or turnips one day and beef-steak and soup the next. We have nothing that I would have eaten at home but I am so hungry when I go to means that I think even turnips delicious.<sup>37</sup>

The cadets complaints became so numerous that Richardson investigated their claims for the Board of Visitors. In a letter to Smith, Richardson noted with some disgust: “the Corps of Cadets is far better subsisted than any private family I know. General Lee himself lives almost entirely upon vegetables, leaving what meat there is for the soldiers – and to descend from the sublime to the ridiculous, I am very near the point of having no meat on my own tables.”<sup>38</sup> VMI eventually instituted a payment-in-kind system where parents would send meat and crops to Smith in lieu of tuition.

Smith also employed agents in Europe to buy and ship supplies to Virginia in blockade runners. The most important of these agents was VMI alumnus, Colonel Benjamin F. Fickle.<sup>39</sup> Smith, selling some of the cattle he had purchased for VMI, gave Ficklin \$10,000 to purchase supplies in Europe. The supplies were successfully run from Nassau through the blockade on Ficklin’s boat the *Giraffe*. However, getting supplies through the blockade was far from guaranteed. In November 1863, a shipment of supplies for VMI left Europe on the steamer *Dare*. Among the cargo was cloth, “a large supply of buttons, and 1,000 pairs of shoes.”<sup>40</sup> The *Dare*, however, was beached near Georgetown, South Carolina in late January and plundered by both the Union and Confederate armies.

The *Dare*, wrote Richardson to Smith, “was boarded by the Yankees who drank freely. The ship was fairly riddled by their shot but when the tide fell our troops could walk around the ship. Most of the cargo was safely landed, and the goods for the Institute, especially the shoes and cloth, were plundered and appropriated on the spot by the Confederate cavalry – and so lost.”<sup>41</sup> Richardson added that the both sides left the textbooks which might be recovered.

Because VMI was a state institution and the Confederate government had not designated the military school as vital to the war effort, both Smith and Richardson often found themselves fighting with the Confederate government over seized supplies. In many cases, one department of the Confederate army would grant supplies to VMI only to have another department take the same supplies away for their use. One such occurrence happened in February 1864. The Confederate Quartermaster General had turned over a large amount of corn to VMI. When a VMI officer went to collect the corn, he found that, “a wagon train, in the service of the Confederate States, had impressed from James Thomson, of Rockbridge County, VA., 210 bushels of corn.”<sup>42</sup> Whitwell was ordered to overtake the wagon train and find the officer in charge and, “demand of him in the name of the Commonwealth of Virginia, that the corn impressed as aforesaid be released and returned to the possession of the Commissary of the Va. Mil. Institute.”<sup>43</sup>

The constant Confederate interference with VMI supplies forced Richardson to send a letter to General A. R. Lawton, the Confederate Quartermaster General.

Richardson wrote:

There are 300 cadets at the Institute in training for the service of the Confederacy, and the difficulty of obtaining subsistence, at all times since the war difficult, will



be rendered impossible unless the orders issued for protecting supplies can be respected.<sup>44</sup>

Richardson also wrote to Smith about the situation:

I saw General Lawton today, who told me he has no control over the Q[uarte]r. M[aste]r's of the Army but that he could give orders to Capt. Tutwiler to replace the supplies which have been impressed. If it comes in time will enclose it. I then went to the Sec'y of War to obtain an order which will protect you against the Army Q[uarte]r. M[aste]r's, but he said they were acting under a military necessity and he had no authority over the case!<sup>45</sup>

Richardson served a very important role during the war as VMI's advocate in Richmond dealing with both the state and Confederate government to obtain everything from supplies to weapons for the school, with varying results, but was never able to increase Confederate support for VMI.

The apparent lack of support by the Confederate Government for VMI was noticed even among the faculty at the school. VMI Commandant of Cadets, Major Scott Ship, wrote to Richardson in early February 1863 saying, "that the Institute is recognized by the Confederate Government on no other footing than an ordinary college."<sup>46</sup>

Richardson wrote to Smith about Ship's comments:

The letter addressed last year to the faculty by Gen. Haymond and myself, I think, shows the contrary. Add to this the well known anxiety of the President, Gen'l Lee, Gen. Johnson and others for keeping it in operation to the extent of its capacity, shows that they all regard it of at least as much consequence to the Confederacy as the late U. S. regarded West Point; in fact, to all intents and purposes as the West Point of the South. I do hope that Maj. Ship will not abandon the great work in which he is engaged.<sup>47</sup>

However, it soon became apparent to Richardson that the Confederate Government did not share his view of considering VMI the "West Point of the Confederacy." In June, 1863, Richardson sent a letter to Davis to try and settle once and for all the question of VMI's role in the military structure of the Confederacy. He wrote

that although order still prevailed at VMI, the cadets were conflicted about whether they should stay in school to complete their studies or immediately resign and go into the field as a soldier in the Confederate army. Richardson added that it was his understanding that the Confederacy considered VMI in the same way that “West Point was to the late United States” and that VMI possessed the best capability of all the military colleges for training officers for the Confederate army. If this was, in fact, the case, Richardson wrote, it would be beneficial for the Confederate government to affirm that the cadets were rendering a more important service to the Confederacy by completing their courses and graduating than by entering the Army. This statement by the government would “effectually remove all doubt or apprehension in their minds as to the line of duty and expediency.”<sup>48</sup> Richardson closed the letter by asking for any suggestions the Confederate government might have for VMI:

The Board of Visitors and the Superintendent are most anxious to direct the operations of the Institute so as most effectually to meet the wants and wishes of the Confederate Government, and I beg leave to say for them that it will be most gratifying to receive from you any suggestions or recommendations as to the character and duration of the course of instruction, and on any and all other matters which in your judgment has, or may have, an important bearing upon prospective value to our common cause.<sup>49</sup>

The response back to Richardson was not written by Davis, but by his aide-de-camp, Colonel William M. Browne. He replied to Richardson that Davis had a “warm interest” in the success of military schools though the south but “he does not desire to be understood to express any especial preference for any.”<sup>50</sup> Browne further wrote:

His Excellency is debarred from expressing any opinion as to whether the cadets at the Virginia Military Institute do better service to their country by pursuing their studies than by joining the Army, because his action in regard to the matter much necessarily conform to the law, which requires all citizens who are over eighteen years of age to enter the service, and which leaves him no discretionary

power to which the case of cadets who have become liable to military duty can be properly referred.<sup>51</sup>

Browne closed the letter by saying that Davis would be glad to comply with any recommendations on the course of study at VMI, “but the pressure of public business will only allow him to refer the Board to a report made by him in 1860 on the subject of military education at West Point, in which his views are given at length.”<sup>52</sup>

Despite being in existence for only two years, the Confederate government had mastered the art of saying much and saying nothing at all. Davis made a smooth political move by not endorsing VMI as the “official” military college of the South, and offending the other states in the Confederacy with military colleges. Davis could have easily designated all Southern military colleges as vital to the Southern war effort so they could perform as “West Points” for the Confederacy without any interference. While most Southern states would not have approved the Confederate Government nationalizing their military schools, a relationship between the states and Confederate Army to commission the military school graduates could have been easily implemented. Instead, Davis paid lip service to the schools and refused to officially acknowledge the important roles the military schools were performing or support them, saving the Confederacy money but creating hardship to the very institutions providing trained men and officers for the Confederate Army.

In Lexington, during May 1863, the cadets performed a very sad and somber duty. General “Stonewall” Jackson had died from wounds sustained at the Battle of Chancellorsville and was buried in Lexington on 15 May, accompanied by a cadet honor guard. With the end of the 1862-1863 school year, the cadets in July returned to summer camp, now called Camp Jackson. The military situation again had changed in the

Shenandoah Valley with the removal of a large portion of the Confederate Army of Western Virginia to reinforce General Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, which left the valley unprotected from raids by Union forces.<sup>53</sup> Smith ordered cadets to keep ammunition and weapons available at all times and to remain in camp, prepared to repel any attack. The routine of camp life reflected the current situation. Daily the cadets performed:

Reveille, 5 AM; Police and inspection of quarters, 5 ½ AM; Artillery drill, 6 ½ AM; 1st Sergeants' call, 6 ½ AM; Breakfast Roll Call, 7 AM; Sick Call, 7 ½ AM; Guard Mounting, 7:40 AM; Camp Inspection, 8 AM; Bayonet exercise, 9 AM; Dinner Roll Call, 1 PM; Drill, 5 PM; Camp police and inspection, 6:15 PM; Dress Parade, 6 ½ PM; Supper Roll Call, 7 PM; Call to Quarters, 8 PM; Tattoo, 9½; Taps, 10 PM.<sup>54</sup>

During the summer encampment the cadets were called to perform military duty for the Confederacy. In August 1863, a detachment of two companies was sent out from VMI to intercept deserters from Lee's army thought to be encamped southwest of Lexington. No deserters were captured and one cadet wrote that the expedition, "proved to be more a frolic than otherwise; vastly different from the rapid mountain marches in severe weather."<sup>55</sup>

The cadets would soon be called upon to help defend the valley. Beginning in August 1863 and continuing into 1864, Union Brigadier General William Woods Averell cavalry force conducted raids into the Shenandoah Valley. These raids into western Virginia played a small part in the Union grand strategy of the war, but they became troublesome to General Lee and caused great fear in the residents of the Shenandoah Valley.<sup>56</sup> The three raids conducted by Hunter in the late summer, fall and winter of 1863 would cause the Corps of Cadets to be called out each time to help defend the Shenandoah Valley, severely disrupting academic duties. Not a shot was fired by the

corps, nor was the corps under fire during the raids, but, as VMI historian William Couper pointed out, the value of the raids for VMI came in indirect ways. The raids, wrote Couper, “compelled the adoption of a policy of defense for the State property at Lexington; it secured better arms for the cadets and far the most important, it served to accustom the cadets to service in the field and harden them for more arduous campaigns in the session.”<sup>57</sup>

On 19 August, Averell and his force had reached Franklin, Virginia and had continued on, with his objective to destroy the vital saltpeter works and gunpowder factories of western Virginia. Facing Averell was Colonel William L. “Mudwall” Jackson, a second cousin of Stonewall Jackson and former lieutenant governor of Virginia. On 25 August, Averell was closing in on Old Millboro, only twenty-seven miles from Lexington. Jackson sent a call for support to Smith. Smith alerted two companies of cadets and called out and armed two companies of the Home Guard in Lexington to aid Jackson.

Smith, still mindful of the embarrassing event that had occurred the year before, immediately sent a letter to Richardson explaining his action. In his letter he wrote:

The home guard in Lexington, composed of two companies, were promptly armed and equipped by me with the muskets sent us from Lynchburg. I then organized a battery of four pieces of artillery of the cadets, with two infantry companies of cadets as a support, and the whole command started this afternoon. . . . The urgency of the call, and the prompt response of the home guard, composed of our worthiest citizens, some of whom are upwards of 65 years of age, make the duty imperative to go to the relief of the gallant band under Jackson. . . . We do not expect to be absent more than two or three days.<sup>58</sup>

Smith was correct, Averill retreated and the corps returned to VMI on the evening of 27 August, after marching a total of fifty miles. A cadet that had remained at VMI

wrote of the returning cadets, “they are broken down sorefooted and quite mad that they were not permitted to go on and engage the enemy.”<sup>59</sup>

Smith used the episode to press Richardson for further guidance about how and when the cadets were to be employed as a military unit. In his report to Richardson after the Corps of Cadets returned to VMI, Smith attempted to illustrate the situation he faced in regard to the use of the cadets. Smith wrote that Jackson had requested the cooperation of the Corps of Cadets in a diversion after the cadets had returned to Lexington. Smith felt constrained to help Jackson due to guidance from Richardson. Smith wrote:

And now, while matters are taking the direction of greater pressure from the enemy, I should be pleased to receive *specific directions* from the Governor and Board of Visitors and Adjutant General, as to my duty in these emergencies, crowding as they do upon us, in a moment of panic. I want to do my *whole duty*, but before doing it, *I must know what that duty is*.<sup>60</sup>

Richardson responded to Smith on 4 September. He wrote that the Governor supported Smith’s actions in supporting Jackson and additionally:

To disembarass you of all doubts and difficulties which may grow out of the movements of the enemy in that portion of the state, and appreciating to its fullest force the necessity of determining, as you request, what your duty is or may be in any contingency, the Governor decides, that although general military service is not due from the corps of cadets to the state, yet that corps, to the extent of guarding and defending the military institute, and other public property connected with it, being a part of the military establishment of the state, may and must be used for that purpose when the necessity arises; and whether that defense be necessary upon the spot, or at a distance even of fifty miles, that does to affect or impair the obligation to meet the duty as the guard of the institution.<sup>61</sup>

Richardson then added a “catch-all” authorization for Smith to use the cadets at any time:

Emergencies may arise at any time while a state of war exists, which may compel you to make the defense of the institute at some other and distant point or points. . . . Your own military attainments and experience, in his estimation, will always enable you, better than he can do at a distance, to determine upon the time, the

place and measure of such defense as may be needful. It is scarcely necessary to add, that needless exposure of the corps of cadets shall be carefully avoided.<sup>62</sup>

More than two years into the war, the Virginia government finally provided Smith written guidance on how and when the Corps of Cadets were to be used as a military unit. Smith now had authority to use the Corps when and where, in his estimation, they were needed by state and Confederate forces. From this point until the end of the war, the VMI Corps of Cadets would find themselves more and more on campaigns than engaged in the classroom.

Since the cadets were being sent into combat, Smith was concerned about the conditions of the cadet's weapons. In another letter to Richardson on 28 August, Smith expanded on the inadequacy of the cadets weapons and the dire straits the corps would be in if called out again to defend the valley and engaged in combat. The cadets needed new and better weapons. Smith wrote:

I would respectfully ask, therefore, that two rifled guns, with 200 rounds of fixed ammunition for each, be immediately forwarded to this institution for the use of the corps of cadets. If the Governor has no means within his power to order these munitions from the ordnance department of Virginia, I think it probable a plain statement of the facts of the case would cause the President to order the same from the ordnance department of the Confederate States.<sup>63</sup>

Richardson immediately began searching for both artillery and rifles to provide to the Corps of Cadets, finally delivering two rifled field pieces captured from Union forces and 200 Austrian short barrel rifles from the Confederate Government.<sup>64</sup>

Averell, with 5,000 men, staged his second raid on 1 November 1863. Meeting initial success, Averell continued toward Staunton with Jackson and General John Imboden's Confederate Cavalry engaging him. Staunton was secure but Lexington appeared threatened. Smith had heard rumors of Averell's advance and on 6 November

received confirmation from Confederate authorities in Staunton. Smith ordered arms issued to the home guard and sent word to Imboden that the cadets would be dispatched to cooperate with him. Ship was given command of 225 cadets and ordered to meet Imboden's forces who were at Covington. While the cadets were marching towards Covington, Averell and Imboden skirmished outside the town and the Union cavalry retreated. Imboden sent word to Smith that it was not necessary to advance further. Averell's second raid was over.

The cadets returned to VMI on 11 November, Founders Day. Smith was again proud of the cadets and in his General Orders No. 88 published on 11 November, he stated: "the duty has been patiently and cheerfully discharged in the midst of privations and discomforts which a veteran might even shrink from, and a spirit has been exhibited by the Corps of Cadets which reflects the highest honor upon themselves, and upon the accomplished officer who has the high responsibility of their command."<sup>65</sup> Imboden also sent words of praise to the Corps and added to Smith: "the Institution over which you have so long presided has always been an object of deep interest to me, and I have greatly regretted during the past three years that I had not enjoyed the advantages of a training within its walls. I have sons growing up, who if I live, shall not have the same cause of regret."<sup>66</sup>

However, Averell was not done. In early December, he again pushed into Virginia with his objective the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad at Salem, southwest of Lexington. To mask his actual objective, feints were planned against Staunton and Dublin.<sup>67</sup> Averell reached Salem and destroyed a large amount of rail stock and then proceeded to New Castle. The Confederates were preparing a trap for Averell but



Averell's feints towards Staunton caused Imboden to request the Corps of Cadets to occupy the passes at Panther Gap and Goshen. Again, Ship departed with 180 cadets but incessant rain for two days caused the cadets to only reach Bratton's Run, where the cadets had to wade waist deep in freezing water to build a bridge for artillery to cross. The cadets reached Cold Sulphur Springs on 17 December, "through mud & water a foot deep near ten miles."<sup>68</sup> A house near the cadets campsite contained a still and "every boy got enough to drink to make him sleep and to keep him from taking cold. In fact the majority of the boys were quite merry."<sup>69</sup> The next day, the cadets were ordered to march back to Lexington, again in freezing rain. For the cadets, many hung-over and without shoes, the march back was torture. Averell had managed to escape the Confederate trap and escape into West Virginia with minimum losses. The cadets returned once again to VMI on 21 December, wet, tired and miserable. Cadet Stanard wrote to his mother: "Well dear Mother we reached our journeys end Monday evening and nar'e yankee did we kill or see after marching us all over this plagued mountainous country, and ruining our feet, we being badly shod at the time. . . . Although we were so near drowned, yet there was no grumbling."<sup>70</sup>

During the three raids, the cadets had been gone from VMI a total of thirteen days, but with the rehabilitation of the cadets after each march and the disruption of their studies, the fall semester was a total loss academically. The constant marching had also taken a toll on the cadets physically and on their clothing, shoes and equipment. On 18 December, Richardson wrote to Smith that the Confederate Government was furnishing 250 pairs of shoes to be deducted from the supply of General Longstreet's Corps.<sup>71</sup> On 21 December, Richardson wrote to Smith that the Confederate Secretary of War had

decided, “whenever the cadets are out upon the call of the Confederate Gov’t - they shall be supplied by the Confed Gov’t.”<sup>72</sup>

Richardson was also concerned what effect the constant military service was having on the cadet’s studies. On 19 December, he wrote, “it is time now, I think, to define distinctly what military service is legitimately due from them, for if they are to be called out upon all occasions the school must be abandoned.”<sup>73</sup> Richardson wrote again of the matter on Christmas Eve: “it appears to me that if these calls continue to occur as frequently as heretofore, the whole course of education at the Institute will be broken up, and that it is full time that the question should be made and determined, what is the extent of service that they may be called on to perform.”<sup>74</sup> But Richardson was also proud of the Corps of Cadets and what they had accomplished:

Truly the Corps of Cadets has been subjected to a severe test, and I am proud that they have sustained and added to the reputation of the Institute by the fortitude and courage with which they passed through it. What can the “penny wise” Legislators who grudge every dollar, however needful say now? Parents and guardians have reason to be proud of their sons and wards and the Yankees have in this an additional evidence that when the very boys of the South more than cheerfully, encounter the hardest service and sustain themselves under it like veteran troops, they have small chance of subduing such a people.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Shenandoah River runs south to north emptying into the Potomac River. Therefore moving “up” the valley means heading south.

<sup>2</sup>Couper, II, 142.

<sup>3</sup>Telegram, 21 April 1862, General W. H. Richardson to General Smith, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.

<sup>4</sup>Couper, II, 143.

<sup>5</sup>General Orders No. 44, VMI Order Book 1862, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.

<sup>6</sup>Wise, 188. There are no letters that exist of Smith volunteering the use of the Corps of Cadets to Jackson. Wise mentions it in his history but Couper does not.

<sup>7</sup>Snodgrass to his sister, 29 April 1862, Snodgrass Letters, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.

<sup>8</sup>Smith, 185.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>General Orders No. 46, VMI Order Book 1862, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.

<sup>11</sup>Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1862, Board of Visitors Minutes, 1853-1864, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.

<sup>12</sup>Snodgrass to Kate, no date, Snodgrass Letters, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.

<sup>13</sup>Couper, II, 149.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 150.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 151.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 151.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 152.

<sup>18</sup>Wise, 188.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 189.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 190.

<sup>22</sup>Couper, II, 155.

<sup>23</sup>Wise, 206.

<sup>24</sup>Snodgrass to Kate, 18 May 1862, Snodgrass Letters, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 156.

<sup>26</sup>Snodgrass to Sister, 8 June 1862, Snodgrass Letters, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.

- <sup>27</sup>Conrad, 58.
- <sup>28</sup>One cadet died from an illness contracted during the campaign.
- <sup>29</sup>Richardson to Smith, 5 August 1863, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>30</sup>McMurry, 50.
- <sup>31</sup>Langhorne to Aunt, 28 September 1862, J. Kent Langhorne Papers, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.
- <sup>32</sup>Couper, II, 168.
- <sup>33</sup>Robert E. Lee to Francis H. Smith, 26 October 1862, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.
- <sup>34</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup>Smith, 183.
- <sup>36</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup>Couper, II, 251.
- <sup>38</sup>Richardson to Smith, 3 May 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>39</sup>Smith, 183.
- <sup>40</sup>Richardson to Smith, 11 and 18 November 1863, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>41</sup>Richardson to Smith, 18 January 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>42</sup>Special Orders No. 64, 1864, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>43</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup>Richardson to Smith, 15 March 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>45</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup>Richardson to Smith, 4 February 1863, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.

- <sup>47</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup>*OR*, Series IV, Vol. II, 592-593.
- <sup>49</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>50</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup>Ibid., 597.
- <sup>52</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>53</sup>Couper, II, 202.
- <sup>54</sup>Couper, II, 203.
- <sup>55</sup>Ibid., 204. VMI Special Orders No. 144 13 August 1863 ordered “50 of the Corps of Cadets , to return to duty here by tomorrow night.” The cadets were “requested by General Colston, on behalf of the Enrolling Officer for this district, Captain Lilly, to aid him in arresting a party of deserters who are said to be in this vicinity.”
- <sup>56</sup>Couper, II, 207.
- <sup>57</sup>Ibid., 207.
- <sup>58</sup>Smith to Richardson, 25 August 1863, transcribed by William Couper, Superintendent’s Records: Outgoing Correspondence, VMI, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>59</sup>Stanard, 9.
- <sup>60</sup>Superintendent’s Records: Outgoing Correspondence, 27 August 1863, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.
- <sup>61</sup>Richardson to Smith, 4 September 1863, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>62</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>63</sup>Couper, II, 214.
- <sup>64</sup>Ibid., 215.
- <sup>65</sup>VMI General Orders No. 88, 11 November 1863, VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia.
- <sup>66</sup>Couper, II, 229.
- <sup>67</sup>Conrad, 81.

<sup>68</sup>Stanard, 24.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>71</sup>Richardson to Smith, 18 December 1863, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>72</sup>Richardson to Smith, 21 Dec 1863, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>73</sup>Richardson to Smith, 19 December 1863, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>74</sup>Richardson to Smith, 24 December 1863, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>75</sup>Richardson to Smith, 28 December 1863, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE LATE WAR YEARS, 1864-1865

January 1864 brought a period of normalcy back to the cadets and their studies at VMI but a major change to the leadership in the State of Virginia. On 1 January, John Letcher, his term expired, left office as governor, replaced by William Smith. Letcher, a native of Lexington, was a supporter of VMI and instrumental in ensuring state support for the school during wartime. Additionally, Letcher had a close friendship and good working relationship with Adjutant General Richardson. Richardson wrote to General Francis Smith of VMI in March that “Gov L is missed everywhere here, every day – especially by myself.”<sup>1</sup>

Spring ushered in a new campaign season to Virginia, but this season would prove to be unlike any General Lee or the Confederacy had ever faced. On 9 March, Lincoln appointed Ulysses S. Grant as the General of the Armies. Grant immediately instituted a new strategy to end the war using his armies to coordinate strikes in order to overwhelm the South. The major forces in Grant’s plan were the Army of the Potomac under General George Meade, who was tasked with finding and hammering Lee’s Army in Virginia, and General William T. Sherman with his armies in the Western theater moving through the Deep South in Tennessee and Georgia. As part of these main strikes, numerous smaller Union armies would be active throughout the South. Among these were General Franz Sigel and a small army in the Shenandoah Valley. Sigel’s orders were to advance up the Valley and deny the Confederates the use of and the spring harvest from the fertile Shenandoah Valley.<sup>2</sup>

Confederate forces were few in the Shenandoah and General Smith, aware that the Valley would be woefully undefended against a sizable Union force, sent a letter to Richardson stressing the “importance of fortifying the passes from the Central Railroad into the County of Rockbridge.”<sup>3</sup> Richardson passed Smith’s idea to General Braxton Bragg, serving as the new military advisor and chief-of-staff to Davis. Bragg replied to Richardson that, “the suggestions of Gen’l Smith appear to me judicious and they are in accordance with recommendations made to the Commander of the Dept.”<sup>4</sup> Receiving blessings from both the Confederate and Virginia governments, Smith drew up a plan to use the Corps of Cadets with the upcoming spring and summer campaigns.

With constant news of increasing Confederate personnel losses, citizens in and around Lexington questioned why cadets, especially those over eighteen years of age, were still in school and not in the Army. The continuing taunts took a toll on the older cadets and resignations increased. Cadet John Shields wrote of “the galling taunts they hissed at the ‘Conscripts Exempts’ as they called the full-grown, over eighteen cadets. No less than 100 have resigned since I have been here, as fast as they reach the age of eighteen, they resign, and more is thought of them, than if they did not.”<sup>5</sup> Another cadet, over eighteen and whose parents would not let him resign, wrote to his mother, “is this what I was sent here for, to shovel with the spade & dig with the hoe for the protection of the Rockbridge Negroes?...I think you had just as well give your consent at once to my resigning and entering the Army.”<sup>6</sup> Cadets concerns even reached Richardson who wrote Smith about them and the continuing support of the state for VMI’s mission of producing officers for the Confederate army. Richardson wrote:



Yesterday a letter from a cadet of one of the junior classes was read to me, in which it is stated that a high degree of excitement growing out of anxiety to join the army, exists in the corps. That cadets are reproached by soldiers and others as having sheltered themselves from the field by going to the Institute. But the whole State knows how false the charge is – the promptitude and zeal of the cadets upon every occasion have fully disproved it and the evidence so honorable to them, is of record on the Journals of the Legislature. The taunts, therefore, of ignorant soldiers and of malignant persons around them are utterly unworthy of the least.<sup>7</sup>

Smith, to stop the exodus of cadets resigning in order to have an adequate number of cadets for upcoming military operations, issued on 14 March an order forbidding future cadet resignations:

Cadets desiring to avail themselves of the authority given to the Superintendent by the Board of Visitors to accept the resignation of cadets to enter the military service, must present their applications in due form before the 11th of April, as no cadet will be allowed to resign for this purpose from that date, until after the annual examination in June.<sup>8</sup>

Smith, through Richardson, sent a letter to Lee offering the use of the Corps of Cadets for military operations in late April, 1864. In the letter containing Lee's response, Richardson informed Smith that, "the board of Visitors only require that the Corps of Cadets shall conform to *his* views, as given in the letter I send you herewith," a testament to the stature which Lee was regarded by the state of Virginia. Lee thanked Smith for the service of the cadets and that, "it is very gratifying to me to know that they are so freely placed at my disposal," but it was not the right time to call the cadets into the army.<sup>9</sup>

Instead, the cadets were:

now in a situation to render valuable aid in defending our western frontier which may be menaced simultaneously with the general advance of the enemy in the east. It will thus prevent the necessity of detaching troops from this army. I think it would be advisable for Gen'l Smith to hold the command in readiness to cooperate with Gen'l Breckinridge and Gen'l Imboden in case of necessity, and to notify those officers of the fact.<sup>10</sup>

General John C. Breckenridge, a former U. S. Vice President and Presidential candidate, was appointed as general in charge of defending the Shenandoah Valley. Breckenridge wrote to Smith on 4 May acknowledging both Smith's and Lee's letters and thanking the cadets for their service.

Only days later, Sigel's Union Army was advancing up the Valley causing Breckenridge to send another letter to VMI on 10 May, calling the cadets into service:

Sigel is moving up the Valley – was at Strasburg last night. I cannot tell you whether this is his destination. I would be glad to have your assistance at once with the cadets and the section of artillery. Bring all the forage and rations you can.<sup>11</sup>

Breckenridge's letter was read to the Corps and Cadet John Wise wrote of the cadet's reaction to the news they were going into Confederate service:

Still silence reigned. Then, as company after company broke ranks, the air was rent with wild cheering at the thought that our hour was come at last. Elsewhere in the Confederacy, death, disaster, disappointment may have by this time chilled the ardor of our battle people, but here, in this little band of fledglings, the hope of battle flamed as brightly as on the morning of Manassas.<sup>12</sup>

The New Market campaign, which the cadets embarked on, has been written about in numerous books and articles, so a detailed account of the campaign is not necessary, but a brief one is provided for narration. On the morning of 11 May, 247 cadets, under the command of Ship, left Lexington towards Staunton, reaching it on the twelfth and departing for New Market on the 13th.<sup>13</sup> The Corps marched eighty-one miles in four days to reach New Market.<sup>14</sup> The damp, cool morning of 15 May found the cadets with Breckenridge's troops at New Market sheltered in a valley behind the main Confederate line. Breckenridge planned on using the cadets as a reserve and called them forward to a position close to the main line. The cadets advanced in parade formation and

took a few casualties from Union artillery. The cadets continued on, filling gaps in their lines as they marched until they were sheltered out of sight of the artillery.

At mid-day, Sigel arrived with his main body at New Market and established a defensive line on Bushong's Hill, above a farm of the same name. Breckinridge decided to assault the Union lines and ordered his forces to advance. Union artillery, firing into the center of his line with double-loaded grapeshot, inflicted huge casualties on the Confederate units. The advance stalled and a gap opened in the center of the Confederate lines.

Breckenridge realized he would have to commit his reserves but agonized over sending the Corps of Cadets into battle. His assistant ordnance officer, Major Charles Semple, told Breckenridge that the cadets would fight like veterans and if the gap in the line was not closed the battle would be lost.<sup>15</sup> Breckenridge, with tears in his eyes, told Semple to "put the boys in, and may God forgive me for the order."<sup>16</sup>

The cadets advancing again in parade formation attracted the attention of Union artillery and they began to receive murderous fire, forcing them to take cover behind a wood fence in an orchard. By this time, Sigel had seen the situation in the middle of the Confederate lines and ordered a Union advance. It was the Union's turn to take enormous casualties and the attack was beaten back. As a huge thunderstorm broke, the Confederates again charged into the Union lines. The cadets advanced with the Confederate line, losing their shoes in a muddy depression and again taking casualties from Union artillery. The cadets reached the Union lines, rushed through the Union infantry to a Union artillery battery, capturing a gun and the crew. The Confederate troops succeeded in breaking the Union lines and the remaining Union forces retreated

down the Valley with the Confederates and cadets in pursuit. The Battle of New Market was over.

Breckenridge rode up to the cadet battery after the battle telling them, “boys, the work you did today will make you famous.”<sup>17</sup> A cadet replied, “General, Fame’s all right, but for Gawd’s sake where is your commissary wagon? We like Fame sandwiched with bacon and hard-tack.”<sup>18</sup> For the rest of his life, Breckinridge would call them, “my cadets.”

While the cadets were victorious and had “finally seen the elephant,” they had paid a large price. Twenty-four percent of those engaged were casualties, with ten killed on the battlefield or from wounds obtained on the battlefield and forty-seven cadets wounded out of 247 cadets.<sup>19</sup> Attesting to the young age of most of the cadets at New Market, forty out of the forty-seven cadets killed or wounded were either Third (sophomore) or Fourth (freshmen) Classmen. Among the cadets at New Market were sons and relatives of some of the most important men in Virginia and the South; General Lee, Secretary of War Seddon and General Early had nephews, former Governors Letcher and Wise had sons and two of General Breckinridge’s cousins were cadets.<sup>20</sup>

The Battle of New Market was relatively inconsequential compared to other battles in the Shenandoah Valley but it did temporarily secure the valley and allow the harvesting of the spring wheat crop for the Confederate Army.<sup>21</sup> With Sigel no longer a threat, Breckinridge was able to transfer his brigades from the Shenandoah Valley to supply Lee with additional troops during the Battle of Cold Harbor.<sup>22</sup> However, the cadets, unlike other campaigns they had been on, had been vital in this battle but it would prove to be a pyrrhic victory.<sup>23</sup>

Unaware that the cadets were already in Confederate service, Confederate authorities were planning on calling the cadets into military service in mid-May to help defend Richmond. Confederate Secretary of War Seddon ordered the cadets on 16 May to “aid in the defense of the Capital [to] serve within the entrenchments or in guarding some of our most important lines of communication.”<sup>24</sup> After news of the battle reached Richmond, the Secretary of War still wanted the cadets for two weeks of service around Richmond. Governor Smith decided to leave that decision up to General Smith. Richardson wrote to Smith on 19 May, after news of the Battle of New Market had reached Richmond:

I have accordingly telegraphed to Maj. Bell for you today that considering the near proximity to the annual examinations the Gov'r directs that if you deem it most advisable for the Corps to return directly to Lexington, you are at liberty to do so. . . . Parents and friends are some of them are anxious for them to come here, but the defense of the City for the present is pretty well secured, I suppose, and it is less needful than on the 16th. They want them to have it to say that they participated in that defense. Might they not do this during the period of the encampment. The Sec'y of War requested me today to order them to join Custis Lee's Brigade, which is in the field below here – to which the Gov. say he will object.<sup>25</sup>

Smith, realizing the positive publicity VMI would receive, took the cadets to Richmond where they served in the defensive line around Richmond until 28 May. While in the lines, the cadets were addressed by both President Davis and Governor Smith and were presented a resolution by the Senate and House of the Confederate States on their recent military service.

The Corps continued in Confederate service until 6 June, when they were returned to State authorities. A new threat had appeared in the Shenandoah Valley and the cadets were ordered back to Lexington. Richardson provided additional guidance to Smith for the use of the cadets as a military unit:

The Governor approves the order of ex-Governor Letcher of 4 September, 1863 and adopts it so far as at present applicable. . . . In the event of difficulty or peril in making that defense, except by co-operation with the troops of the Confederate Government, it will be needful to afford that co-operation, at least to such extent as the security of the Military Institute may require – of which you much necessity be the Judge. Bearing in mind however always that the Corps be not further exposed in battle than absolute necessity may require.<sup>26</sup>

The new threat was Sigel's replacement, Major General David Hunter, a Virginian and a native of the Shenandoah Valley. Hunter was ordered to destroy any crops he could, destroy Lynchburg and Staunton and avenge the defeat suffered by the Union forces at New Market. On 26 May, Hunter, with 10,000 men, started up the Valley. With Breckenridge's forces helping Lee, Hunter made rapid progress and reached New Market on 30 May, only fifteen days after the battle. Union forces, seeing the Yankee dead hastily buried in mass graves by the Confederates, became enraged and pressed on. Confederate forces were defeated north of Staunton and Hunter occupied Staunton, only thirty-three miles north of Lexington, on 6 June. Destroying Staunton, he next decided to advance on Lynchburg through Lexington.

The cadets arrived in Lexington from Richmond on 9 June. On 10 June, Hunter's forces were to the north of Lexington skirmishing with Brigadier General John McCausland's Confederate forces. McCausland, a 1857 graduate of VMI, fought desperately to keep Hunter out of Lexington, but was too weak to make a long stand.<sup>27</sup> McCausland ordered the evacuation of Lexington the evening of the tenth.

On 11 June, McCausland's rear guard fell back across the North (now Maury) River Bridge. Once his force was across, cadet sappers burned the bridge and the cadet howitzers fired on the bridges piling to destroy them, then fell back to VMI. Soon an artillery duel developed between Union guns across the river and McCausland's artillery

positioned at VMI. When Union shells struck the Institute, Smith moved the cadets to Washington College for protection. Near the President's home on Washington College campus, the cadets tore up the VMI flag carried at New Market and distributed the pieces among themselves.<sup>28</sup>

The Union forces soon forded the river and occupied Lexington. Among the lead of the Union forces were three former VMI cadets; Charles H. McLane, dismissed from VMI for excess demerits in 1859; William H. Gillespie, a 1862 graduate serving with the 14th West Virginia Infantry; and Theodore W. Boydston who had attended VMI for twenty-five days in 1861.<sup>29</sup>

After ransacking VMI and "liberating" the statue of George Washington,<sup>30</sup> Hunter burned VMI over the protests of his officers. Hunter, despite a Federal Army order prohibiting the damage of educational institutions, saw VMI as part of the military establishment of the South, ironic considering the lack of recognition from the Confederate Government. Governor Letcher's home was also burned. The cadets marching from Lexington saw the town ablaze: "we came in full sight of our old home, the day was bright and clear, and we saw the towers and turrets of barracks, mess-hall and professors' houses in full blaze, sending up great masses of flame and smoke."<sup>31</sup> The cadets continued to Balcony Falls on the way to Lynchburg and set up defensive positions. On 14 June, Smith moved the cadets to Lynchburg to join the Confederate force defending the town under Breckinridge.

On 18 June, Hunter commenced attacking Lynchburg, but Confederate forces, recently reinforced, withstood the attacks. Cadets assisted in the cities defense assigned to trenches located in a graveyard. Cadet Wise wrote that, "the afternoon we spent there,

sitting upon graves and among tombstones in a cold, drizzling rain, was anything but cheerful.”<sup>32</sup> The next day Hunter, short on supplies, retreated and took his army out of the Shenandoah Valley.

The cadets were ordered back to Lexington and arrived on 24 June. With VMI destroyed, the cadets took quarters at nearby Washington College. The destruction of VMI demoralized the cadets, but Smith, in a letter to Richardson, took another view: “(T)he Virginia Military Institute still proudly and defiantly stands. The brick and mortar which gave temporary shelter . . . constituted not the Military school of Virginia. Thank God, that still lives.”<sup>33</sup>

The first reports of the burning of VMI reached Richmond on 17 June. Richardson at once called a meeting of the Board of Visitors. The immediate topic of discussion was the re-opening of the school and where to re-locate it. Washington College, Lynchburg College, Randolph-Macon College, and the University of Virginia were mentioned as possibilities.<sup>34</sup> In Richardson’s letter to Smith concerning the Boards meeting in Richmond, he also sought to allay any concerns that Smith had with cooperating with Breckinridge in Lynchburg and the immediate future of the Corps:

Let me say at once that you have allowed yourself to be surprised and pained without cause, since neither the B[oard]. Nor myself supposed you have departed from instructions. . . . I suppose it will be advisable after arranging the classes for the next session to furlough as many as can go home, until 1 Sept. But there must be many who cannot get home and provision must be made for keeping them together and for receiving the new cadets.<sup>35</sup>

On 27 June, members of the Class of 1864 graduated and the rest of the Corps was furloughed until 1 September.

On 4 July, a letter arrived to Smith from Lee concerning the destruction of VMI:



I have been grieved over the destruction of the Military Institute. But the good that has been done to the country cannot be destroyed, nor can its name or fame perish. It will rise stronger than before, and continue to diffuse its benefits to a grateful people. Under your wise administration, there will be no suspension of its usefulness. The difficulties by which it is surrounded will call forth greater energies from its officers and increased diligence from its pupils. Its prosperity I consider certain.<sup>36</sup>

However, others were having doubts about the continuation of VMI due to the lack of support from the Confederate Government. Despite efforts of Richardson in 1863, the Confederate government refused in June 1864 to grant automatic commissions to VMI and other military college graduates. Richardson wrote in late June:

It seems the President cannot commission our graduates. Now if there be no place for them but in the ranks of the army as privates the State has little inducement to continue the Institution. The Sec'y of War told me he had got a bill through the H[ouse of] R[epresentatives] providing for the case but it failed in the Senate.<sup>37</sup>

Governor Smith also was tiring of the relationship between VMI and the Confederate Government. Richardson wrote, "The Governor or Col. M\_\_\_\_, [*sic*] or both, have very officiously made some filling up of the diplomas which were sent up only for signature and the seal – omitting all recognition of the Confederate States."<sup>38</sup> Governor Smith was upset over the lack of payment for costs incurred by the cadets during and after the Battle of New Market. He declared that the State would not pay the bill for supplies because the cadets were in Confederate service and thus the Confederate Government should pay.<sup>39</sup>

The Board of Visitors met in Lexington from 15 to 21 July. The decision was made to re-open the school in Lexington. The board also commissioned a study to "enquire into the liability of the Cadets to be called into military service."<sup>40</sup> The report by the Special Committee stated that according to the law, the cadets could not be used as a military unit:

Carefully examined the laws organizing the Institute, and having unanimously concluded that those laws do not subject the Cadets to any military service, save that of guarding and preserving the buildings, arms, ammunition and other public property, belonging to the state and appurtenant to the arsenal at Lexington. . . . [T]hey are under the exclusive jurisdiction and control of the Board of Visitors. Your Committee are also of opinion that the provision found in the several laws regulating the powers and duties of the Board of Visitors, by which they are authorized to proscribe the “kind” and “nature of their service,” would empower the Board of Visitors (and them alone) to send them into such active service.

The Committee continued:

Your Committee does not at all regret the fact that the Cadets have been heretofore called into the active service of the country. They believe that the Crops bore itself on those occasions in a manner becoming the children of their “mother” state, and rejoice in the belief that by their noble bearing they reflected high honor both on the Institute and the Commonwealth. The duty of the Board is none the less clear however to place the future exercise of the power of employing the services of the Cadets in duty, dangerous however honorable, in the hands entitled to wield it, and remove so far as in them lies all doubt that may heretofore have rested on the subject.<sup>41</sup>

Preparations to re-open VMI fell behind schedule and the date for the fall semester was first moved to 1 October and then pushed to 20 October and finally 1 November. However, with General Early’s defeat at the Battle of Fishers Hill in September, the Shenandoah Valley was again open to Union forces. Richardson directed Smith not to organize the Corps of Cadets until the fate of the Shenandoah Valley was decided.<sup>42</sup>

With the cadets on furlough, the Confederate government decided that they would be better employed in the defenses around Richmond than waiting at home for VMI to re-open. Richardson wrote on 27 September, that, “The Sec’y [of War] is anxious for the cadets to assemble here immediately, and organize for the defense of the metropolis until their furloughs expire, the Gov’t will provide for them. . . . The Board will meet about it tomorrow. . . . Mr. Seddon says they shall be relieved from service soon enough to report

at Lexington whenever required.”<sup>43</sup> However, at the Board meeting the next day, the members declined to order the cadets into Confederate service due to want of authority. The Secretary of War upon hearing the Board’s action told Richardson he would, “be compelled to call the cadets of the suitable age into the service as reserves, and that he will not release them to return to the Institute.”<sup>44</sup> The conscription truce in effect since early 1862 between Confederate and state officials had been broken. Before Seddon could carry out his threat, the military situation around Richmond grew worse. On 29 September, Union forces took Fort Harrison, one of the most important defenses in the outer defenses of Richmond. Urgent calls went out throughout Virginia for all available men to gather in Richmond to bolster defenses. About thirty cadets reported for duty in Richmond under the command of Cadet Captain Pizzini, a veteran of the New Market campaign.<sup>45</sup>

Seddon, however, went ahead with the call up of cadets and on 3 October, the reserve commander of the Confederate forces, General Kemper, wrote to Smith with some alarming news. The Confederate government was ordering the Corps of Cadets into active service without requesting permission from the State leadership or Smith. He wrote:

The order which will be published tomorrow call upon the cadets to assemble at Camp Lee for field service, during the present vacation, would probably have answered a better purpose and appeared more appropriate, if issued over your name, and I should certainly have preferred it in that form, but the instructions of the Sec’y of War and the pressure of the emergency were so urgent as to allow me no time to correspond with you in advance. I hope and trust, however, you will come down and give us the advantage of your cooperation and your counsels which will receive sincere deference and entitle you to our grateful acknowledgments.<sup>46</sup>

The order mentioned in Kemper's letter, No. 102, was published the next day in Richmond. It stated that all cadets aged seventeen and older were required to report to Richmond for temporary field service and that all furlough and exemptions granted to cadets were, by the command of the Secretary of War, revoked. The order also invited cadets less than seventeen years of age to also report to Richmond.

Smith was outraged and immediately sent a letter to Richardson about the Confederate Government's action. Smith, perhaps experiencing a change of heart after the New Market campaign and the destruction of the Institute, now did not want to send the cadets into the field. Smith wrote:

The authority exercised by the Confederate authorities over the cadets of the Virginia Military Institute, under these orders, is directly in conflict with the instructions which I have received from the Governor of Virginia, under your order of October 14, 1862, and of the Special Order given to me personally by His Excellency, Governor Smith, in June, 1864. . . . But the State, through its Military Institute, stands as a guardian, in her sovereign capacity, to these young soldiers, and it seems to be but just and proper that when their services are required on the field of battle they should be sent forth under the authority of the State whose servants they are, that the care and protection which has been assumed and promised to them may be rendered.<sup>47</sup>

Smith closed his letter with a dire prediction:

If Special Orders No. 102 be persisted in, the organization of the Virginia Military Institute will be destroyed, and I apprehend the worst of consequences to the individual members of the Institute.<sup>48</sup>

State authorities, however, informed Smith, that the use of the cadets was based on an emergency and the mobilization proceeded in accordance with Special Orders No. 102.<sup>49</sup> The small number of cadets already in Richmond under the command of Cadet Pizzini were sent into the exterior lines outside Osbourne Turnpike, to act as skirmishers and sharpshooters, but were ill equipped for those jobs due to their smoothbore muskets.

After a few days the cadets' situation improved when they were taken out of the trenches and made a headquarters guard. (Figure 2)

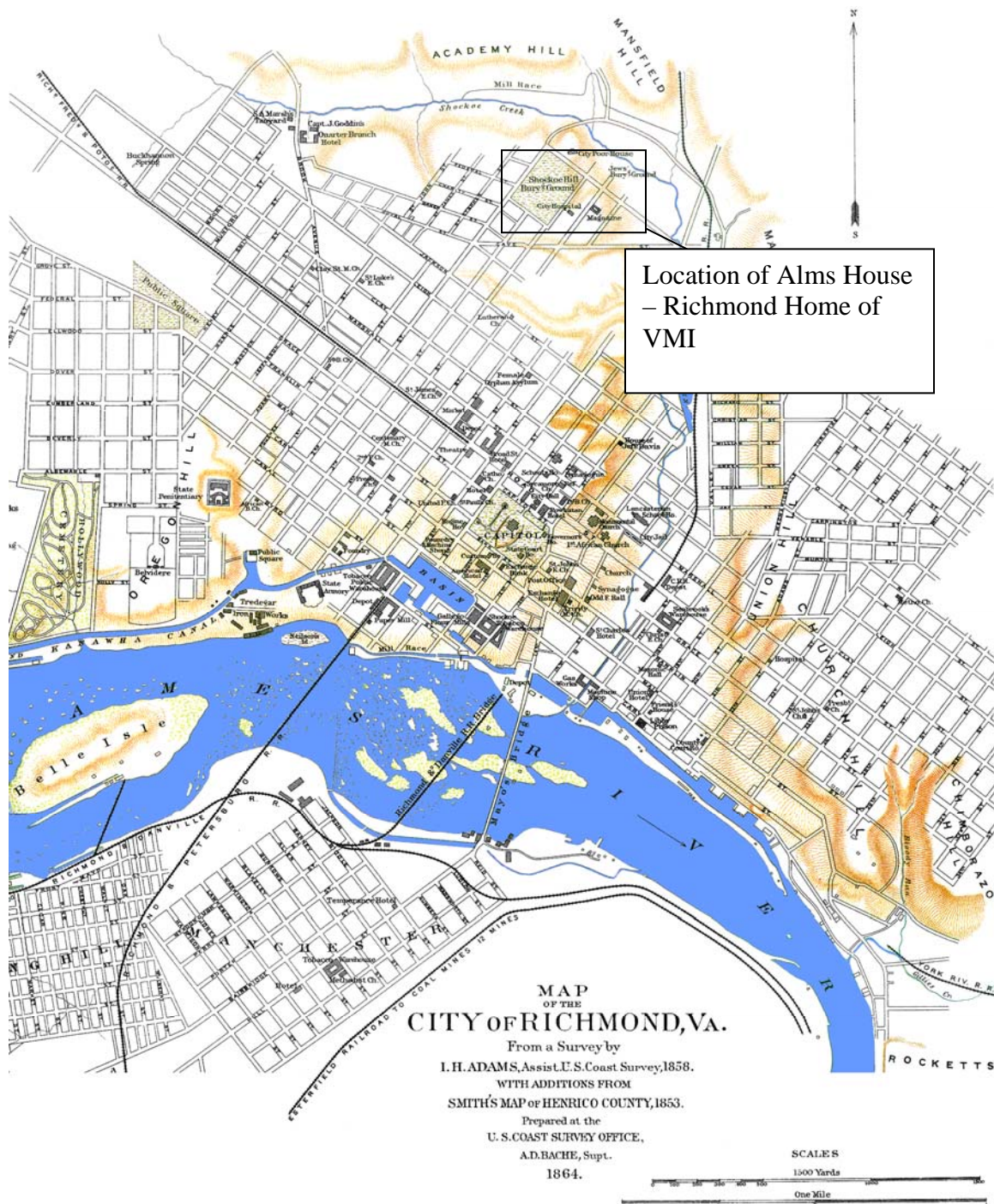


Figure 2. Richmond During Civil War

By 11 November, 262 cadets were employed in defense of Richmond.<sup>50</sup> Smith who was still in Lexington, ordered Ship to organize and take control of the cadets in Richmond. Ship's first order of business was to move the cadets from Richmond and, "the command of officers of the Reserve Forces, Gen. Moore and men of that ilk, under whom I did not choose to service if I could avoid it."<sup>51</sup> The cadets were soon dispatched to bolster the Confederate defenses near Williamsburg currently under attack by Major General Benjamin Butler's Army of the James. Ship requested that the cadets be taken into active Confederate service and the order was granted, transferring the cadets from the Reserve Forces to General Ewell's Department of Richmond.

Smith continued working to find a place to re-open VMI and was eventually offered the use of the Alms House by the City of Richmond. On 12 December, the cadets were released from the field and mustered at the Alms House. The cadets were then furloughed until 23 December, but some cadets had difficulty returning and did not reach Richmond until January.

The Alms House was a relatively new structure built just before the war started, but use as a hospital had taken a toll on the structure and as a result it was not a cheerful place.<sup>52</sup> A cadet described their new home:

The Alms House was to many of us a doleful place. Shockoe Hill Cemetery was just across the street in front of us. The Jewish Cemetery to our left, separated from us by an area used for a Parade-ground, the Colored Cemetery to the rear, and in the rear just outside the enclosure, the Gallows, with many gruesome associations.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to the dreary surrounding, the cadets were also subjected to taunting by soldiers and other "lesser" citizens of Richmond:

Our life was not altogether monotonous. The Second Street toughs were constantly jibing the cadets whenever they appeared, and so insufferable had this

become at one time that a collision between the cadets and these rowdies was constantly feared.<sup>54</sup>

On 28 December, Smith gathered the cadets, along with soldiers, officials and citizens at the Alms House to celebrate the resumption of the academic duties of VMI. In Smith's speech, he criticized, with pointed language, the Confederate Governments lack of support for VMI and other southern military colleges and equated this lack to the failing fortunes of the Confederate military. There is no doubt that Smith's speech was intended for the consumption of Confederate authorities in VMI's new adopted city. The speech crystallized what role VMI should have played during the war. Smith told the cadets:

There must then have been good and substantial reasons which the governing authorities of the institution to order its continuance, at such a time and under such circumstances. . . . And the first and paramount motive was – a sense of the essential importance of this military school to the military defense of our suffering and bleeding country. When the Confederate Army was first organized, on the opening of the war, most persons felt the importance of military education. The graduates of the U. S. Military Academy at West Point, of the Virginia Military Institute, and of the various military schools of the South were promptly and eagerly sought for, to take commanding positions in this army. . . . And the country reaped the benefits of this providential supply of well-qualified officers. The signal success which crowned our arms, especially in Virginia was earned by the valor of our troops, under the training and discipline of such commanders. But other views, in the progress of the war, gained ground. It has been thought that the battlefield is the place to tutor officers – and that, now that our whole country has been made one military camp, the lessons which shall qualify the soldier for command, are only properly to acquire there. Legislation has followed the popular idea; appointments to command are made by popular election; popularity, or supposed fitness, secured advancement in many cases, to the rejection of the educated military talent of the country. . . . I am prepared to say that our country is now reaping the consequences of grave error on this point, and that the disasters which have attended our arms have been mainly due to the lack of that discipline and drill which it is the special province of military schools to impart. . . . Improper or ill-advised legislation may, for a time, keep the educated cadets out of the position of greatest usefulness to the country; but all here trained, if true to themselves and to the institution which nurtures them, will ultimately rise to the positions for which they are qualified. . . . But this institution, by virtue of its peculiar relations to the State, as a part of its military organization, and still more,

in consequence of the material advantages resulting to the Confederate Government, by the continued operations of so important an establishment, has hitherto been enabled to protect its pupils from conscription; and it is believed when the reasons for so doing are fully understood – and the results commensurate with public expectation are fully received – their exemption will still continue as an essential element in the public defense. . . . Some may consider this a good place to frolic, or to spend money or to have fun. Are there any so craven as to come here to keep out of the army? . . . But, whatever be the private motive which draws any cadet to the Military School . . . he has no business here. The cadets who, having passed the age of seventeen, spends his time in idleness, or folly, or mischief, is a skulker from military service, and this is no place for him.<sup>55</sup>

The speech would prove too little, too late for VMI and the Confederacy. If Smith's speech was intended for the Confederate government, it fell on deaf ears. The Confederate government viewed the cadets in Richmond not as students but as a source of trained soldiers available for rapid responses to bolster the capital's defenses.

On 29 January, General Ewell requested the cadets to help disperse a Union cavalry attack. Richardson sent the request to Governor Smith with the recommendation that the cadets, "be held in readiness, but that the academic course ought not to be interrupted without extreme necessity. The Governor concurred and orders were issued accordingly."<sup>56</sup> Later that afternoon, Ewell wrote Richardson that the crisis had passed. Ewell did, however, request information from Colonel Ship: "How long it will take to get the cadets under arms, and in readiness to take the field, I could time any call so as not to apply until the last emergency, and thus avoid useless interruptions."<sup>57</sup>

The continuing Union activity around Richmond and the harsh conditions of the Alms House increased the restlessness of the cadets. So many cadets informed the administration of their desire to resign that the Board of Visitors passed a resolution urging the Secretary of War to allow cadets in good standing to choose the corps or



company that they preferred.<sup>58</sup> The cadets, fearing that the Corps would be re-called into the field, preferred to join a cavalry or artillery unit to the infantry.<sup>59</sup>

The leadership of VMI sought other ways to aid the Confederacy and its increasing manpower shortage. Smith, in a letter to Richardson, outlined a plan to arm slaves for military service and use the cadets as drillmasters. Richardson was not impressed by the idea and wrote to Smith that, “if the State authorities would act promptly in searching out and arresting deserters and stragglers from the army, a large reinforcement might be obtained in less time than a negro force could be organized and prepared for the field.”<sup>60</sup> However, the idea did not stop with Richardson’s objection. Colonel Preston, in charge of the Corps in Richmond, wrote to the new Secretary of War, John C. Breckinridge, about Smith’s plan on the seventeenth. Preston suggested that the maximum number to be raised would be half a million because this number would, “by the effect upon the minds of owners and slaves, facilitate and insure the raising of 200,000.”<sup>61</sup> He went on to suggest that in the event the troops were raised, Breckinridge, “might command the services of the Corps of Cadets with their officers to perform the work of organization and drilling in the shortest time, and with the greatest efficiency.”<sup>62</sup> The war ended before any definite action could be taken by the Confederate Government, but it is ironic that the cadets would end the war as they began it: as drillmasters training an army.

In March, the Governor requested that one hundred cadets be called into service as cavalry, to be mounted upon gentlemen’s horses. Preston sent a response to the Governor that the Corps, “is organized as an infantry command, and they are also instructed in artillery. They have never been drilled as cavalry. . . . To make the detail

you suggest, would entirely disorganize them as a corps and render inefficient in their proper service.”<sup>63</sup>

The cadets were ordered, along with the other reserves including departmental clerks, to repel Sheridan’s cavalry on 12 March. The cadets threw up hasty entrenchments near Westham Plank Road and waited but an attack never materialized and the cadets returned to the Almshouse on 13 March.<sup>64</sup>

The Corps was called out for the last time on 1 April. Alarms about Union advances had been constant occurrences in previous months, but this alarm seemed very different.<sup>65</sup> Cadet F. H. Smith Jr., noted that, “it was apparent to us that something out of the ordinary was taking place. Rockets and other signals were seen, and a general air of excitement seems to prevail. At taps many of us kept our clothes on and watched from the windows, expecting orders of some sort calling out the corps. We did not have to wait long, for in a short time a horseman rode rapidly to the front of barracks and . . . asked for the Superintendent.”<sup>66</sup>

The cadets marched through Richmond to take over rifle pits so that Longstreet’s Corps could aid Lee in Petersburg. According to a cadet, the Corps, “were placed in the rifle-pits early Sunday morning, 2 April. We were separated from the enemy by a heavy body of pines. Our pickets and those of the enemy were in speaking distance.”<sup>67</sup> The cadets were facing the enemy with no other friendly troops in support and terrified that an attack could come at any time. “We remained there,” continued Smith, “constantly expecting attack, and when the tremendous cheering of the enemy was heard, from time to time, we were sure our time had come. If anything more uncomfortable than this waiting could have been found, we didn’t care to experience it.”<sup>68</sup>

The cadets were relieved by some dismounted cavalry in the late afternoon and headed back into the city. Along the way some of the cadet's fathers from Richmond informed them that Petersburg had fallen and Richmond would soon fall. The cadets continued on to Capital Square where the scene was one of panic and confusion before returning to the Almshouse. There the cadets were, "disbanded and directed to escape the best way we could, as in a body we could not reach any organized Confederate field force."<sup>69</sup>

Small groups of cadets then made their way out of Richmond. Some attached themselves to other units in Virginia while others headed to North Carolina. By late April, all cadets had been captured, surrendered or had reached their homes.<sup>70</sup> For the cadets of the Virginia Military Institute, their military service to the Confederacy and State of Virginia had ended.

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<sup>1</sup>Richardson to Smith, 14 March 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>2</sup>Couper, II, 256.

<sup>3</sup>Richardson to Smith, 26 March 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Conrad, 85.

<sup>6</sup>Stanard, 47.

<sup>7</sup>Richardson to Smith, 30 April 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>8</sup>Couper, II, 256.

<sup>9</sup>Lee to Richardson, 25 April 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Annual report of the Superintendent, 15 July 1864, 40, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>12</sup>Wise article.

<sup>13</sup>Smith did not accompany the cadets into battle, instead remaining in Lexington and supervising the organization and leadership of the Home Guard. Smith did travel to New Market after the battle was over.

<sup>14</sup>Couper, III, 17.

<sup>15</sup>Conrad, 96.

<sup>16</sup>William C. Davis, *The Battle of New Market* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 119.

<sup>17</sup>Conrad, 99.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Edwin L. Dooley, Jr., "Smith and VMI on the Eve of the Civil War," in *A Crowd of Honorable Youth*, ed. Thomas W. Davis et al. (Lexington: VMI, 1989), 17-18; *Crowd of Honorable Youth*, 39.

<sup>21</sup>Davis, 184.

<sup>22</sup>James Gindlesperger, *Seed Corn of the Confederacy* (Shippensburg: Burd, 1997), 139.

<sup>23</sup>Davis, 178.

<sup>24</sup>Richardson to Smith, 16 May 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>25</sup>Richardson to Smith, 19 May 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Conrad, 102.

<sup>28</sup>Couper, III, 25. Only a couple of pieces of the cadet flag remain today and are located at the New Market Battlefield Museum.

- <sup>29</sup>McMurry, 53 and Conrad, 103.
- <sup>30</sup>The statue was to be sent to West Point as a war trophy. It was returned to VMI a few years after wars end.
- <sup>31</sup>Wise article.
- <sup>32</sup>Couper, III, 47.
- <sup>33</sup>Smith to Richardson, 27 July 1864, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>34</sup>Conrad, 107.
- <sup>35</sup>Richardson to Smith, 21 June 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>36</sup>Couper, III, 53.
- <sup>37</sup>Richardson to Smith, 21 June 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA. In 1863, the Board of Visitors requested that President Davis appoint a military committee to evaluate graduates for commissions in the Confederate Army.
- <sup>38</sup>Richardson to Smith, 4 July 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA. In 1863, the VMI diploma was altered to read, “the Fourth day of July in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three and of the Confederate States the third.” Couper, II, 192.
- <sup>39</sup>Richardson to Smith, 6 July 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>40</sup>Board of Visitors Minutes, 18 July 1864, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>41</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup>Richardson to Smith, 24 September 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>43</sup>Richardson to Smith, 27 September 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>44</sup>Richardson to Smith, 28 September 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>45</sup>Couper, III, 59.
- <sup>46</sup>Ibid.

- <sup>47</sup>Ibid., 62
- <sup>48</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>50</sup>Conrad, 125.
- <sup>51</sup>Ship to Smith, 2 November 1864, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>52</sup>The Alms House is still standing today, virtually unchanged from its Civil War appearance.
- <sup>53</sup>Francis H. Smith, Jr., "Military Service of the Corps of Cadets," *The Cadet*, 3 January 1914.
- <sup>54</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>55</sup>Wise, 397-404.
- <sup>56</sup>Couper, III, 79.
- <sup>57</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup>Ibid., 80.
- <sup>59</sup>Richardson to Smith, 21 February 1865, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>60</sup>Richardson to Smith, 16 February 1864, transcribed by William Couper, VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.
- <sup>61</sup>OR, Series IV, Vol. III, 1093.
- <sup>62</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>63</sup>Couper, III, 83.
- <sup>64</sup>Ibid., 84.
- <sup>65</sup>Ibid., 88.
- <sup>66</sup>Smith, Jr., *The Cadet*.
- <sup>67</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Couper, III, 92.

<sup>70</sup>McMurry, 53.

## CONCLUSION

Both the Federal and Reconstructionist Virginia State governments were hesitant to support a college that had produced large numbers of officers in the Confederate army, but allowed the Institute to re-open shortly after the end of the war on 16 October 1865. With the buildings still in ruins, cadets were billeted in private homes and forbidden by the Provincial Government of Virginia from wearing uniforms or drilling with arms.<sup>1</sup> VMI survived the first five years after the war on private donations and faculty salary reductions.

The faculty had especially been hit hard by the war. Eighteen of the pre-war faculty was killed in the war and others had to leave their teaching positions at VMI due to their fortunes being destroyed by the conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Reconstruction, however, forced VMI to emphasize its academic mission over its military one, due both to the policies of the new state government and that VMI was one of the few colleges open in Virginia. Through the efforts of Smith, Adjutant General Richardson, and VMI alumni, the Institute expanded and grew academically, soon attracting a new and distinguished faculty.<sup>3</sup> George Washington Custis Lee (Robert E. Lee's son), John Mercer Brooke and Matthew Fontaine Maury all joined the faculty in the five years after the war.<sup>4</sup> VMI's military aspect, which had dominated the curriculum before and during the war, while still important, was replaced by a renewed emphasis on education.

The two oldest southern military schools, the Virginia Military Institute and the Citadel, eventually re-opened after the war.<sup>5</sup> Other military colleges throughout the south either closed, as with Georgia Military Institute and North Carolina Military Institute, or



reverted back to their original roles as civilian colleges, such as the University of Alabama. But military schools and education were not finished in the south. The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 created a new generation of southern military colleges in the decades after the Civil War.<sup>6</sup> Under the act, the Federal government pledged grant land for each state to be sold. The income generated by the sale was to be used to support a college that provided instruction in scientific agriculture and the practical sciences.<sup>7</sup> While not emphasizing military instruction, the act did call for the inclusion of military tactics in the curriculum. Land-grant colleges emphasized military training for discipline purposes as opposed to training officers for the state militia. Southern land grant colleges embraced military instruction and nearly all the colleges created by the act became full-fledged military schools: Texas A&M, Arkansas, North Georgia, Auburn, Virginia Tech, Mississippi State, Clemson and North Carolina State. Additionally several black colleges also adopted the military education system. Today, military training is still offered at many of these colleges and some retain a corps of cadets.

Early in the war, the Confederate government passed legislation creating a national military academy and establishing the rank of Cadet. The national military college was unnecessary because the Confederacy already possessed numerous state military colleges. However, the Confederate government failed to properly engage these individual state schools by providing curriculum recommendations or commissioning their graduates. This shortsighted and domineering attitude by the Confederate government ensured that the military colleges failed in their mission to produce a large number of officers for the Confederate army.<sup>8</sup>

It was the state governments (especially Virginia and South Carolina), not the Confederacy, that realized the importance that military colleges in the Confederacy and kept them operating with very little Confederate support. Virginia made a conscious decision to keep VMI open, not as a short term “officer candidate school,” but with her four-year military and academic curriculum intact. Supporting the school both militarily and financially, VMI produced the most officers of the southern military colleges for service in the Confederate army and 1,827 out of 1,930 (94.7%) alumni served in the Confederate military during the war.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the cadets themselves were used as a military unit by the Confederate and state governments numerous times in the war.

Actions by the Confederate government, such as the 1862 Conscription Act, made the job of VMI and the other military schools harder, not easier. By not excluding cadets from the draft, a perception was created in the mind of southern citizens, and the cadets themselves, that military colleges were not vital to the war effort and that cadets over eighteen should be serving as a soldier in regular military service.

This had a disastrous effect on VMI as most cadets failed to graduate and left VMI early either by resignation or desertion. Approximately 875 cadets left VMI early, giving the Confederate army a soldier but costing the Confederate army a future officer.<sup>10</sup> If the cadets had been exempted from the draft or the Confederate government had given them the title of “Cadet” in the Confederate army, many cadets would have felt they were supporting the war effort. They would have stayed until graduation at VMI and then been commissioned as officers in the army. By comparison, West Point, with strong Federal support, never had the mass resignations that plagued southern military colleges and continued to provide the Union army with a steady supply of officers during the war.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, by holding the rank of cadet and being part of the Confederate army would have prevented the VMI cadets from being volunteered as a military unit, at least for the early part of the war. Smith believed that volunteering the cadets enabled them to contribute to the southern war effort. In reality, with the exception of the Battle of New Market, the cadets did not see combat or make any substantial contribution to any campaign. The VMI Corps of Cadets was used as a military unit fifteen different times from 1859 to 1865 and it has been estimated that the cadets were away from VMI on military service a full year, making academic instruction very difficult.<sup>12</sup> From May 1864 until the end of the war, the Confederate government considered the VMI cadets only as well trained infantry troops to be used in the defense of Richmond. As with the Mexican governments use of the Mexican military cadets in the Battle of Chapultepec twenty years before, the Confederacy sacrificed its future to try and prevent the inevitable.

With the benefit of hindsight, the cadets performed their most valuable service to the Confederacy at the beginning of the war when they trained over 20,000 recruits and officers for service in the Confederate army. Without their service, the Army of Northern Virginia would not have been the effective fighting force that it was. If the war had continued beyond 1865, the Confederate government would have had to address and change its policy towards VMI and other southern military colleges in order to replace losses in company and field grade officers. As it was, the Confederacy had set itself up for failure throughout the war by not embracing and fully incorporating the Virginia Military Institute and its sister colleges into the Southern war effort.

History, however, is repeating itself at VMI. In 2005, the Virginia state legislature passed legislation re-instating the “state” cadet program. These cadets will be appointed

by state senators, their education paid for by the state and upon graduation will be required to serve two years as officers in the Virginia Army National Guard. VMI is once again producing officers for the state militia.

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Brachlen Flood, *Lee The Last Years* (Boston: Houghton, 1981), 95.

<sup>2</sup>Former Commandant of Cadets, Colonel William Gilham, who had been instrumental in building the military aspect of the Corps in the 1850's, had to leave VMI after the war because he was destitute.

<sup>3</sup>Richardson was re-appointed Adjutant General of Virginia at the end of 1865.

<sup>4</sup>VMI was also helped indirectly by the fact that Robert E. Lee accepted the presidency of Washington College, next to VMI. After Lee's death in 1870, George Washington Cutis Lee left VMI and assumed his father's position at the college.

<sup>5</sup>Federal Troops occupied the Citadel in Charleston until 1882.

<sup>6</sup>Rod Andrew Jr., *Long Gray Lines The Southern Military School Tradition, 1839-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2001), 40.

<sup>7</sup>Francis Smith was a leading proponent of creating an agriculture and sciences college and wrote a book on the subject after traveling in Europe in 1859. His ideas and book influenced the legislation that became the Morrill Act. Smith also intended to pursue adding these courses at VMI but the war did not allow implementation.

<sup>8</sup>Interestingly enough, the Confederate government did establish a Confederate Naval Academy, further proof that the Confederacy viewed VMI, the Citadel and other military colleges as their "West Points."

<sup>9</sup>McMurry, 61.

<sup>10</sup>McMurry, 44. The VMI War Classes of 1863-1868 had a total of 969 matriculants and only 94 graduates.

<sup>11</sup>James L. Morrison, Jr., *The Best School in the World West Point, the Pre-Civil War Years, 1833-1866* (Kent: Kent State, 1986), 136.

<sup>12</sup>Couper, II, 70-72. They were; 1) November 25 to December 10, 1859 – The John Brown Expedition; 2) April 21, 1861 – Corps departed for Richmond to serve as drillmasters; 3) May 1 to 20, 1862 – McDowell Campaign; 4) August 13, 1863 – Search for deserters; 5) August 25, 1863 – Averell's first raid; 6) November 6-11, 1863 – Averell's second raid; 7) December 15 to 19, 1863 – Averell's third raid; 8) May 11 – 21, 1864 – New Market campaign; 9) May 22 – June 6, 1864 – manning trenches in

Richmond; 10) June 7-11, 1864 – Burning of Lexington/Lynchburg; 11) June 12-25 - Lynchburg Campaign; 12) October 1, 1864 – Members in Corps assemble in Richmond; 13) October 27, 1864 – Corps occupy section of Williamsburg Rd; 14) March 11, 1865 – Cadets ordered into Richmond lines; 15) April 1, 1865 – Corps occupied abandoned works on the Charles City Road.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

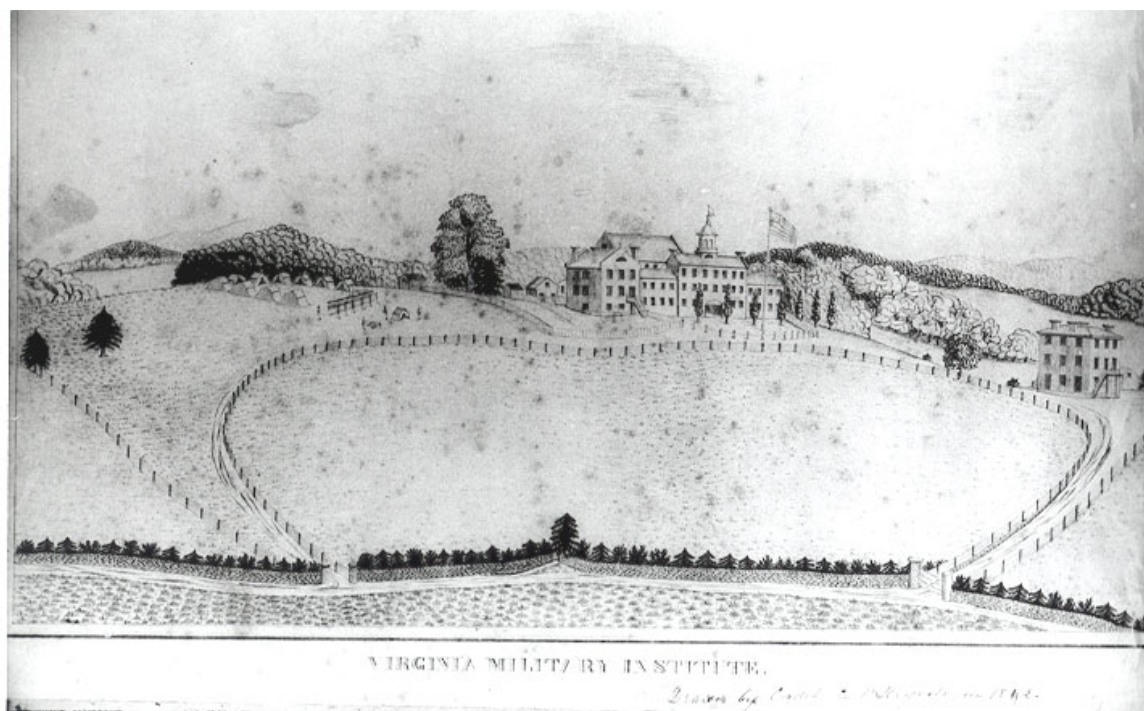


Figure 3. VMI in 1842

Source: Images 3-11 and 13-14 in "Illustrations" all from VMI Archives, Lexington, VA.

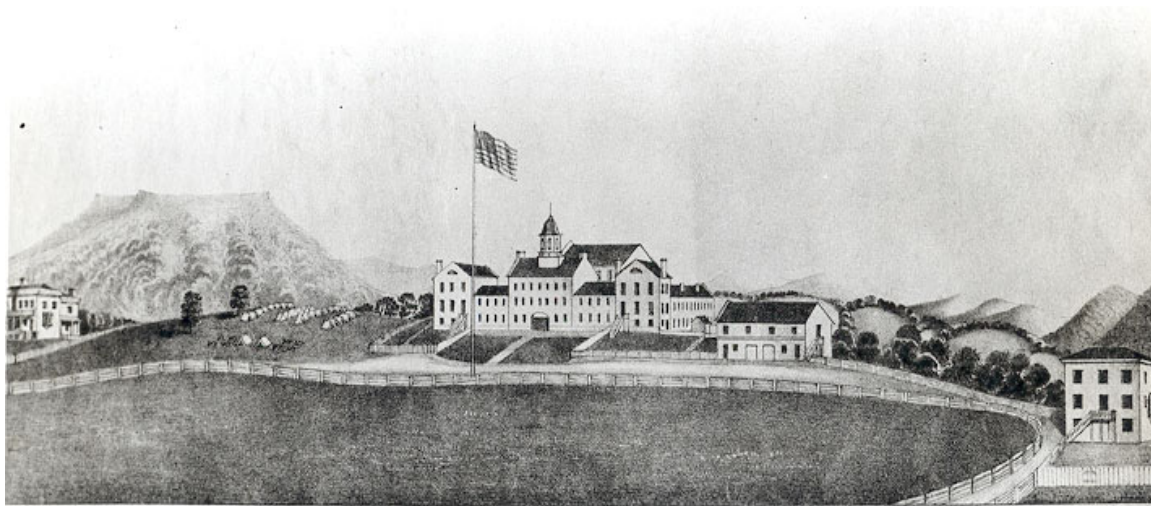


Figure 4. VMI in 1847



Figure 5. VMI in 1857





Figure 6. Francis H. Smith in the 1850s





Figure 7. 1850s Commandant of Cadets William Gilham

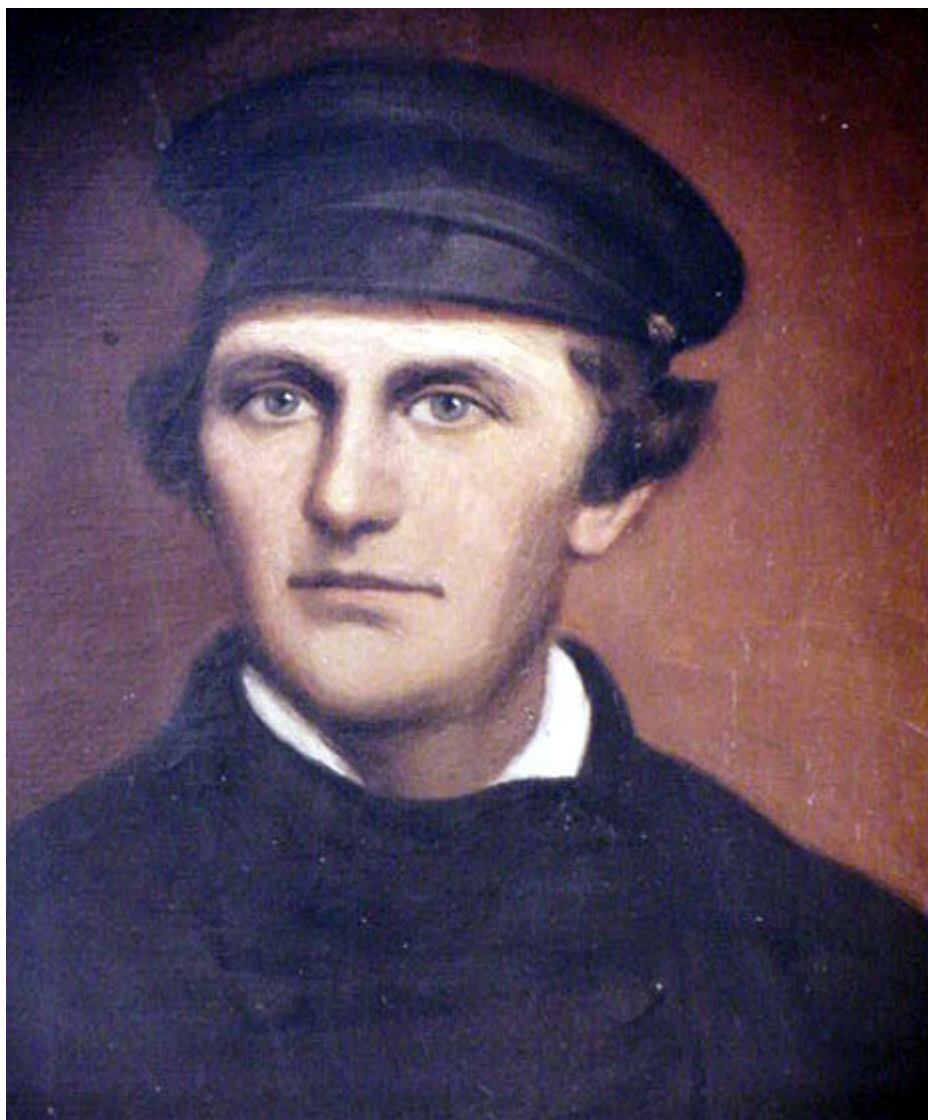


Figure 8. Colonel J. T. L. Preston



Figure 9. War Governor John Letcher



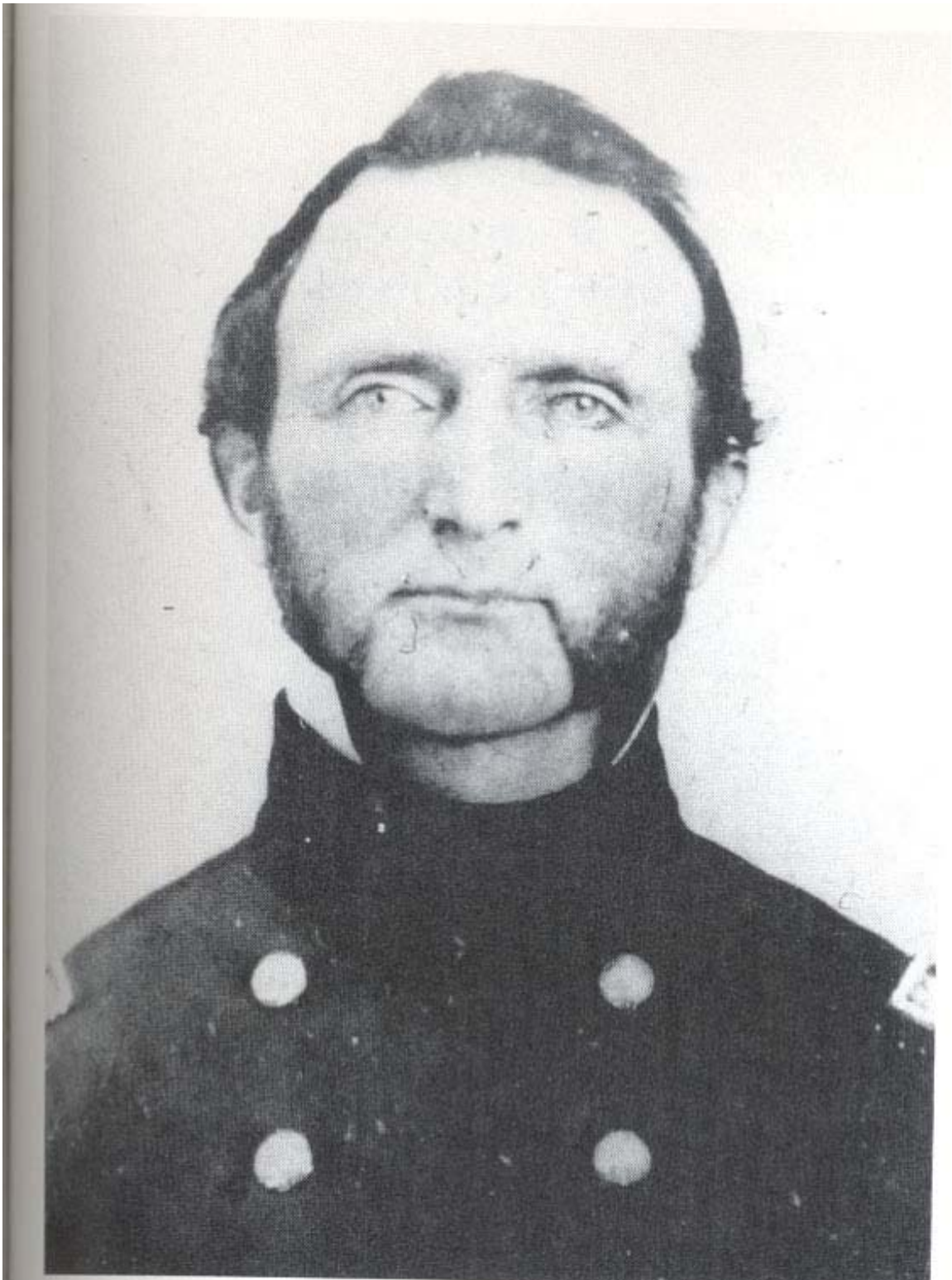


Figure 10. Jackson at VMI during 1850s



Figure 11. Civil War Commandant of VMI Scott Shipp



Figure 12. Alms House, Richmond, VA, during the Civil War  
*Source:* Civil War Richmond, Website. Available from [www.mdgorman.com](http://www.mdgorman.com) accessed on 2 April 2006



Figure 13. Cadet Henry K. Burgwyn 1860



Figure 14. Cadets Gatewood and Warwick, 1861

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